Introduction

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Despite its vibrancy and growth over the past 25 years or so, there is still a sense that green political theory is something done separately from (dare I say) the mainstream. If true, this is no doubt partly due to factors influencing political theory generally, such as increasingly specialized journals and highly focussed conference panels that sometimes seem to speak their own languages. Perhaps the trajectory of green political theory has mirrored that of green politics – apart from myriad examples of lip-service, many would argue, the urgency of the green message has not yet been embraced by leaders and institutions shaping dominant ideas and policies (Andrew Dobson’s contribution suggests something along these lines). Whatever the reasons, this special feature is framed by the conviction that developments in green political theory have much to teach those who toil in other sub-fields of political theory, and indeed other disciplines. Befitting a journal called Contemporary Political Theory, we wanted to try to capture some key threads in green theory and to trace core lines of its development. Readers will find much here to challenge received wisdom, unsettle assumptions and exemplify green political theory’s rich diversity.

Our aim has also been to offer a sense of where green political theory has come from, and where it might be going – this is the point behind the notion of ‘trajectories’. That word, and the assumptions it carries, is far from innocent, as Douglas Torgerson points out in his contribution. It is important that we use the plural – there is no single trajectory, and more significantly there is no assumption that a trajectory need mean a path towards future enlightenment...
or the palpable achievement of an overarching goal. The picture which the three contributions paint, in their different ways, is one of continuing contestation and struggles over ideas both broad and narrow. At least one contributor, Sherilyn MacGregor, offers a sharply critical and pessimistic account of core themes in this body of work. This special feature celebrates green political theory in the way that theorists should: shining a clear and critical spotlight on its strengths and weaknesses and the perennial and new challenges which confront it. One thing the notion of trajectories can capture is change – for example, change in the reception and adaptation of the ideology of ‘ecologism’ (Dobson), or in the ways in which ‘nature’ has been invoked today and in the past (Torgerson).

How a trajectory might be traced depends, of course, on how one sets out to trace it. The contributors start and end with different literatures, time frames and senses of the boundaries of ‘green political theory’ and indeed its sub-fields. Dobson, author of the key textbook in the area which has gone through four editions over the years, traces the linked political and theoretical trajectories of ecologism – his preferred term for the ideology which inspires more mainstream ‘environmentalism’ without (or so he argues) losing its distinctive core. MacGregor traces different trajectories, those of feminist and green political theory (along with ecofeminist thinking), showing how a lack of engagement between these fields, or at least the right sort of engagement, can impoverish each. Torgerson goes much further back in time, reminding us of hugely consequential shifts in the understanding of ‘nature’ over centuries, and how the challenges of competing (political and aesthetic) constructions of nature today are both perennial and new. In some ways, Torgerson’s argument about the importance of how nature is represented aesthetically raises the key issue at stake in designing the special issue – how do we ‘represent’ green political theory? We offer three provocative representations, without suggesting that we achieve a definitive picture of our elusive subject. Each author has been given the freedom to present their distinctive account of green political theory; taken together, the papers both recommend and embody a kind of intellectual pluralism of reference and content.

Having stressed the pluralism of both green political theory and the accounts offered of it in this special feature, it is clear too that persistent and highly contemporary themes of note run across the three contributions. The interplay of two key ideas, ecocentrism and anthropocentrism, clearly remains central to different perspectives in green political theory. Dobson observes a discernible shift over the years from the former to the latter. Tensions between the two ideas are evident in MacGregor’s disquiet over feminist theorists’ views of ecofeminism, and Torgerson’s invocation to engage with representations of nature shows how viewing nature from a human discursive perspective can also highlight the inclusion of us humans within nature. The importance of the rise
of ‘ecological justice’ movements and discourses is also evident across the three pieces, illustrating one important respect in which green thinking has energized and set agendas beyond the focus of its early remits. Indeed, persistent issues regarding academic scholarship and activist politics arise too – are these and many other instances of green political theory exemplars of engaged theory, or perhaps slightly differently problem-driven theory? Further, each of these papers tackles in some way the issue of what it might mean for political theory to be resolutely divided up into discrete pockets of work. The risks and benefits associated with ‘mainstreaming’ are clear in Dobson’s account of what may be gained and lost as green ideas are (in part) adopted in more conventional political ideologies, MacGregor’s frustration at a lack of what we might call cross-streaming between feminist and green theorists, and from a different angle Torgerson’s importing of ‘cultural turn’ approaches into green thinking about representations of nature. And finally, there are common calls for more thinking and action – for heightened and better informed dialogue (or ‘trialogue’) for MacGregor, and attention to continuing contestations of nature that is both detailed and open-minded from Torgerson.

In short, we have here exemplars and overviews of an already widely read body of political theory that deserves an even wider hearing. We hope this special feature helps to foster just that.

‘All I left behind’¹ – The mainstreaming of ecologism

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Twenty years ago the then Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, Margaret Thatcher, made a speech to the Royal Society in which she said that, ‘For generations, we have assumed that the efforts of mankind would leave the fundamental equilibrium of the world’s systems and atmosphere stable. But it is possible that with all these enormous changes (population, agricultural, use of fossil fuels) concentrated into such a short period of time, we have unwittingly begun a massive experiment with the system of this planet itself’ (Thatcher, 1988). This speech is widely recognized as a landmark in the development of the environmental movement – not because Thatcher became a signed-up member of the movement (she didn’t) but because it marked the mainstreaming of environmental concern. The mainstreaming effect was all the more noticeable because Thatcher’s politics represented all that environmentalism had come to abhor – big business, free markets and a stress on the desires of the individual rather than the interests of society. But it was precisely
this that made her speech all the more resonant. After all, if the head of one of the most laissez-faire governments of modern times could even hint at objectives extrinsic to market processes – ‘Protecting this balance of nature is therefore one of the great challenges of the late Twentieth Century’ (Thatcher, 1988) – then surely every part of the political spectrum would feel bound to line up behind what had, until then, been regarded as a luxury concern, to be attended to only when more pressing problems had been sorted out.

The mainstreaming of environmental concern, to which Thatcher’s speech made a key (but of course not the only) contribution, has had a considerable effect on our thinking about environmental problems, and what to do about them. Twenty years on, a trajectory is clearly discernible. ‘Green’ political theory does not look the same now as it did then, and this is in part due, I believe, to the way in which green politics has moved closer to the centre of practical political concern – even to the point where Greens participate in government coalitions (Müller-Rommel and Poguntke, 2002). This was certainly not part of the picture in 1998 when Margaret Thatcher made her ‘environment’ speech. The theoretical trajectory of green parties has tracked, and been reciprocally influenced by, the political trajectory of ecologism, and the direction of both has been towards a mainstream articulation of environmental concern. So what have been the main developments?

To begin at the beginning, three stances in particular seemed to me to distinguish ‘ecologism’ from other political ideologies when I first wrote about this topic in 1990 (Dobson, 1990). It should be stressed that what follows is based on my own interpretation of political ecology, and not everyone will share (or has shared) the perspective I outline here. I do believe, though, that the terms of reference of this perspective are sufficiently widely disseminated for them to be instantly recognizable and of general interest. It seemed to me that these three elements – and particularly the first two – were so different from anything to be found in other modern political ideologies that they constituted the reason why ecologism could be regarded as an ideology in its own right. This led me to distinguish ecologism from ‘environmentalism’, and I took the latter to be assimilable by other ideologies (for example, socialist environmentalism) in a way that the former was not. The first defining characteristic of ecologism was its ‘ecocentrism’ – broadly, the idea that while human beings may be the only entities capable of conferring value, they are not the only entities that have value. In addition, while it might generally be agreed that non-human entities have instrumental value for humans, ecologism’s view was that such entities have value aside from any use they might be to human beings – that, in other words, they have intrinsic value. Thus while arguments might be mounted in defence of conservation of the rainforest on the grounds that its biodiversity might harbour the seeds of cures for human diseases, or that the rainforest is a key
element in stable and predictable climate patterns, or that indigenous tribes depend on it for their survival and wellbeing, political ecologists would say that even if it did not provide us with all these potential or actual benefits, it would still have a 'right' to preservation. Ecocentrists would not necessarily argue that the intrinsic value of non-human entities should trump other values in cases of conflict – simply that they should have a place at the negotiating table.

The second leitmotif of early ecologism was its belief in limits to growth. In 1972 a book of the same name was published (Meadows et al., 1974), and there have been two updates since then (Meadows et al., 1992, 2005). Although the details of the message have changed, the basic idea has remained the same: that continuous growth in a finite system is an impossible aspiration. Thus the scarcity of non-renewable resources, or the stresses brought about by the incapacity of a finite system to cope with the disequilibria brought about by human activity, might both (or separately) result in catastrophe. Various objections to the limits to growth thesis have been entered – that it underestimated the capacity of human ingenuity to meet the challenges engendered by progress, or the capacity of the market to respond to shortages of resources, or that technological advances would enable us to wring ever more out of the resources we do have – but none of them have diverted political ecologists from their belief that political and economic systems that measure success simply in terms of growth in Gross Domestic Product are doomed to fail in the long run.

The third feature of early ecologism played a more instrumental and contingent role in the ideology than either ecocentrism or limits to growth. Confronted by the question of how society might be best organized in order to achieve and maintain a sustainable society, political ecologists argued for radical decentralization. Of course ecologism was not unique in this regard – strands of liberalism and anarchism have also sung the praises of decentralized societies. In keeping with its focus on sustainability, though, ecologism marshalled a distinctive set of reasons for favouring decentralization. While other ideologies root their decentralism in a democratic imperative – face-to-face societies bring decisions, consequences and decision-makers closer together – political ecologists argue(d) that decentralized forms of social organization can bring the ecological consequences of processes of production and consumption to light by bringing the producer and the consumer closer together. To the extent that there is a still a strong tendency towards localization in green politics, the decentralist impulse survives, but it has been drastically tempered by a realism that has brought the state as a key social and political formation and instrument of sustainability back into environmental political theory, as I shall show below.

So ecocentrism, limits to growth and decentralism were arguably the three features of ecologism that most directly served to distinguish it from other
modern political ideologies. As green political theory has developed, these three ‘pillars’ have fared rather differently. This was brought home powerfully to me when I was asked to prepare a fourth edition of *Green Political Thought*. In the first edition I made pretty much the same argument I have made here: that ecologism is a political ideology in its own right, irreducible to any of the other ideologies one finds in textbooks, and that what distinguishes it from these other ideologies is its cleaving to ecocentrism and to limits to growth, allied with a more-or-less principled commitment to decentralization.

Describing ecologism in these terms now is not as convincing as it was then, largely because these ‘pillars’ are not so obviously a part of the ideology as we now encounter it. The reasons for this are complex and interrelated, and have to do with how one determines the content of an ideology in the first place. On one common view, the content is determined by a combination of the ideas that lie behind it, developed in political theory and political philosophy, and the way in which those ideas are put into practice by political formations such as political parties. Like every other ideology, ecologism has been affected by developments along both these lines over the past 20 years.

To take ecocentrism first, the theorists who have been responsible for developing the ideas that have taken it forward and the green parties that have competed in a succession of elections around the world have all relied less and less on the idea of the intrinsic value of nature as a reason for protecting it. Increasingly, human-interested reasons have come to dominate ‘green’ ethical thinking, prompted in large measure, I believe, by the desire to make green politics electorally relevant. Sometimes this shift takes a very straightforward course: environmental degradation is bad for present generation human beings and it should therefore be stopped. Sometimes, though, the argument takes a more complex turn as in the hands, for example, of Bryan Norton (Norton, 1991). Norton has made strenuous efforts to bring the intrinsic valuers and the so-called ‘anthropocentrics’ together by arguing for the interests of *future generations* of human beings. He suggests that our uncertainty about the usefulness of parts of the environment for future humans, and about the degree of ‘redundancy’ that there might be in ecosystems, entails a radical ‘precautionary principle’ that, says Norton, would protect as much of the non-human natural world in the interest of future generations of human beings as it would if the reasons were of an ecocentric sort. This is Norton’s ‘convergence principle’ – the convergence of ecocentrics and what we might call ‘future generationists’ on the same point: a radical protection of the non-human natural world.

This ‘human’ turn in green political theory has taken other forms. One of the most powerful political voices of recent years has been the environmental justice movement (Dobson, 1998; Schlosberg, 1999; Martinez-Alier, 2002; Agyeman et al, 2003). The movement’s activists and advocates argue that
poverty is cause of environmental degradation, and that such degradation is maldistributed, with poor people and communities most likely to suffer it. Moreover, they will say, campaigns in favour of protecting the non-human natural world for reasons of intrinsic value often ignore the human interests that can be the casualties of such protection – as in rainforest or megafauna protection projects. These kinds of arguments have had the effect of moving the idea of social justice much nearer to the heart of green thinking than was the case 20 years ago. Social justice has always been about (among other things) the distribution of goods and bads among human beings, and in this regard environmental justice is no different. The environment becomes something to be distributed, along with other goods and bads such as wealth and poverty, power and powerlessness.

From an ecocentric point of view some environmental justice discourse and practice falls shy of the required target. First it tends to regard the environment as a resource, plain and simple. This runs contrary to the ecocentric view that part of the reason for the environmental ‘crisis’ is our failure to see the environment as anything other than a resource for human use. What is required, say ecocentrics, is a more ‘pacified’ relationship with the non-human natural world, based less on regarding it as a resource and more on treating it as if it has ‘intrinsic value’. The second problem is that environmental justice is anthropocentric – not only is the environment a resource, but its usefulness is to be judged in terms of its usefulness to human beings. On both these counts, environmental justice is at odds with the ecocentric wellsprings of early ecologism, and is a good example of the way in which the discussions taking place within the ideology of ecologism have shifted perceptibly ‘towards the human’. But just as ecologism has many strands and nuances, so does environmental justice and its associated social movement. One of its key texts is the 17 Principles of Environmental Justice, drafted by the Delegates to the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, held on 24-27 October 1991, in Washington, DC. The first of these principles, ‘affirms the sacredness of Mother Earth, ecological unity and the interdependence of all species, and the right to be free from ecological destruction’ (Principles, 1991). Once this is run alongside the egalitarian distributive intentions of the environmental justice movement as characterized above, a powerful and progressive political cocktail emerges.

The case of environmental justice is instructive not only in its exemplifying the ‘humanizing’ of ecologism, but also as an example of the reaction to it adopted by those who might – in an earlier phase of the development of the ideology – have been developing ecocentric philosophy. In the hands of theorists such as UK-based Brian Baxter (Baxter, 2005), for example, the terrain of social justice is not avoided, but is occupied with a view to showing how – despite the protestations of mainstream theorists such as
John Rawls – social justice theory can be moved in an ecocentric direction. Baxter argues that non-human beings can be recipients of justice, and in this way exemplifies another trend in the development of environmental political theory, which is to take mainstream concepts and interrogate them for their ‘anthropocentric bias’, showing how while they have generally been deployed as if human beings were the only beings worthy of political consideration, there is no necessary reason why this should be so.

The other pillar of early ecologism was, as we saw above, the limits to growth thesis. Once again this idea has been modulated in the face of political necessity. Just as it is hard to imagine a political party fighting a campaign on an ecocentric platform, so the idea of a manifesto containing the injunction to consume less on the basis of a declining resource base is hard to conceive. Yet the idea of declining resources, put on the political agenda by the green movement, has been taken seriously by practically all parts of the political spectrum. This ‘taking seriously’ has a number of forms. For example, we have grown very accustomed to the distinction between ‘renewable’ and ‘non-renewable’ resources – a distinction that trades on the idea of limits with its apparent acceptance that the category ‘non-renewable’ implies the possibility of the exhaustion of such resources. Even this, though, is a potentially radical thought with significant implications for systems of production and consumption, and the normative ‘rules’ that might govern societies. For if some resources, at least, are in decline, the ambition to ‘grow’ economies indiscriminately seems less obviously appropriate than in the days of an ‘open’ world of apparently limitless resources. Second, from the normative point of view, if the cake is getting smaller, as it were, some would argue that the prima facie case for dividing it up more equally is stronger than in the context of a cake that might, in principle, just get bigger and bigger. In this latter case, calls for equality can be offset against various versions of the ‘trickle-down’ theory which suggest that all will benefit from an expanding economy even if the gap between those who have the most and those who have the least continues to widen.

In fact the limits to growth thesis, and its derivatives, have spawned a number of more or less mainstream responses, the most important of which is probably ‘ecological modernization’. Whereas this idea would have seemed like heresy to the early ‘limits to growthists’ and would have been rejected as an apostasy as far as the founding principles of ecologism were concerned, any attempt to write up an account of ecologism today would most likely put ecological modernization much closer to the centre of concern than before. The problem established by the limits to growth thesis is that a growing economy seems to imply a growing use of resources and a growing amount of waste to dispose of. The ecological modernizers resist this conclusion by arguing that a ‘decoupling’ of growth and resource use is possible. Technological innovation
will enable us to produce more units of output for declining resource inputs, thus decoupling growth from resource use. This is sometimes also referred to as the ‘dematerialization thesis’.

This is not the place to discuss the debate between ecological modernizers and limits to growthists, far less attempt a resolution of it. The point here is to show how the ‘withdrawal’ from ecocentrism as a founding principle of ecologism in the direction of ‘future generationism’ or ‘enlightened anthropocentrism’ has its analogue in the limits to growth context. In this case the shift is towards ecological modernization. What both these moves have in common is a recognition that there is some intellectual and political substance to the ecologism position, accompanied more or less simultaneously by the belief that there is limited political mileage in it. This belief is one of the prompts that leads to alternative, more mainstream, more politically palatable versions of the original positions in ecologism.

At this point the question for the putative contemporary scholar of ecologism, rather than the one that came onto the scene 20 or so years ago, is whether these shifts in position and priority amount to the kind of change that would require a rewriting of the content of ecologism. As I said earlier, the answer to this question depends to some extent on what we consider ideologies to be, and how we write about them. I argued in *Green Political Thought* that ideologies were marked off from one another by holding positions that could not be assimilated by other ideologies without fundamentally changing their character. It seemed to me that ecocentrism and the limits to growth thesis were the two features of ecologism that distinguished it fundamentally from other ideologies.

Take ecocentrism, for example. It is fair to say, in broad compass, that every other modern political ideology takes the human condition to be its prime concern. Thus ecocentrism is a key differentiating feature of ecologism. Of course it is not true to say that other ideologies either have not or cannot ‘take the environment into account’ – many of them have come to do so. This ‘taking into account’ generally revolves around some version of enlightened anthropocentrism – that we should protect or conserve or otherwise take heed of the non-human natural environment because it is in our interests to do so. Likewise, with one or two arguable exceptions, most modern political ideologies are premised on expanding economies, and so the idea that there might be limits to growth is alien to them. Thus limits to growth sets ecologism apart from other political ideologies.

And here is the rub. Both of the responses to ecologism’s twin pillars discussed above – that is, future generationism/enlightened anthropocentrism and ecological modernization – are positions that I would have regarded as lying between ecologism and other ideologies rather than distinguishing them one from another. Rather than being distinguishing features, they are characteristics that can be quite comfortably shared across ideologies. If one
came across ecologism now, as it were, these crossover features would be much more apparent than they were in both the ideological platforms and the academic commentary of around 20 years ago. So what are we to conclude? Is it that ecologism does not exist any more because it seems to have lost interest in its centre of gravity?

This is not the conclusion I would draw. After all, it is not as though the ideas that originally animated ecologism have disappeared, it is just they have gone somewhat into hiding as compromises have been made as a result of political and academic mainstreaming. There has been a certain impatience with the all-or-nothing critique that animated ecologism in its early days, with its insistence that, ‘Nothing short of a cultural “paradigm shift” and a “new ecocentric ethic”’ (Barry, 1999, p. 6) will do. John Barry argues – along with others – that, ‘Ideological accounts of green politics are characterized by a tendency to neglect the difficult task of working out the theoretical and practical implications of their principles and values’ (Barry, 1999, p. 5). It is this ‘working out’ that has led to the rethinking of which John Barry speaks, and in its most general form it involves ‘the transformation as opposed to the abolition of the liberal democratic state’ (Barry, 1999, p. 2). In this sense we are in the midst of a wave of green theory which, rather than distancing itself from established political ideologies, is engaging with them.

This reference to the liberal democratic state leads to the final key shift in green ideological orientation over the past 20 years – the move from a radically decentralized picture of the sustainable society to one that involves an endorsement (albeit qualified) of the state as an agent of ecological transformation. At one time, Alan Carter’s view that the state is at the heart of an ‘ecologically hazardous dynamic’ (Carter, 1999) was near to the centre of gravity of political-ecological thinking as far as agency was concerned. Now Robyn Eckersley’s *The Green State* (2004), with the idea that the ship must be rebuilt at sea rather than taken into dry dock and started all over again, is much the more common view. There has of course always been an awareness in ecological thinking that (some) environmental problems have an international character; it is obvious that air pollution, for example, does not stop at national boundaries. Globalization has intensified the interrelated nature of the causes and consequences of environmental problems in ways that were less apparent 20 years ago, and the old green adage ‘act local think global’ seems – to some – a less effective and realistic guide to political agency than it once did. These changes in circumstance and context have brought about a significant reappraisal of the state in environmental theory and practice, and attempts have been made to describe what a ‘green’ or ‘eco’ state would look like (De Geus, 1996; Eckersley, 2004). Once again this is not the place to assess the strengths and weaknesses of these accounts; it is enough to note that the trajectory in regard to preferred forms of social
organization in environmental political theory has been away from decentralization towards the state.

In sum, three of the key reference points of the ecologism of 20 years ago have come in for serious reappraisal over the past two decades. The trajectory has been one of increasing political relevance accompanied by a declining reliance on the normative positions that first marked it out for attention in the field of political ideologies. What does the future hold? It is very unlikely that the positions of 20 years ago will return to ecologism’s centre stage, especially as environmental issues come to occupy more of our mainstream attention.

Yet those positions, as we have seen, are present in the attenuated positions that have come to dominate contemporary environmental political theory, and there are signs that the distinction between environmentalism and ecologism is as relevant as ever when it comes to analysing environment-related politics. For example, the financial crisis of 2008–2009 has given a lease of life to a genre of green thinking around the idea of a ‘Green New Deal’, aimed at tackling the ‘triple crunch’ of financial chaos, declining oil supplies and catastrophic climate change (nef, 2008). In broad terms the Green New Deal involves re-regulation of finance and public spending on ‘green’ technologies. But there are more and less radical (in political-ecological terms) versions of the Green New Deal. As Tim Jackson has pointed out, one version is aimed at business as usual: ‘Kick start the circular flow of the economy and watch it grow’ (Jackson, 2009, p. 66). The other version, in contrast, recognizes that, ‘Returning the economy to a condition of continual consumption growth is the default assumption of Keynesianism’, but argues that, ‘this condition is unsustainable. There is no consistent vision of a growing economy that delivers absolute decoupling. And the systemic drivers of economic growth push us relentlessly towards ever more unsustainable resource throughput. A different kind of economic structure is needed for an ecologically-constrained world’ (Jackson, 2009, p. 67). Now why does that sound familiar?

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Notes

1 Emmylou Harris, from the album ‘Songbird: Rare Tracks and Forgotten Gems’ (September 2007)
2 www.andrewdobson.com
3 I distinguish participation in government from the election of Green Party members to national legislatures which of course was already happening by 1990 (for example in Germany in 1983).

4 As one of the anonymous referees pointed out to me, it is also striking the degree to which science has played a key role in the development of environmental political theory, from the implications for economic growth of the Second Law of Thermodynamics to the science that lies behind the politics of climate change.

5 Ecological modernization is not a monolithic system of thought and practice and there are more and less radical versions of it. Peter Christoff (1996) shows this very clearly.

References


Natural allies, perennial foes? On the trajectories of feminist and green political thought

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Introduction

A trajectory, the path followed by a moving object, inevitably involves a look to the future: where will it land? Reviewing the trajectories of, and relationship between, feminist and green political thought (GPT) leaves me frustrated about the past and pessimistic about the future. For although there is a range of possible ways in which feminist and environmental theory might fruitfully connect, more often than not they do not. As a gendered human being on an imperilled planet, there is good reason to hope their paths might change direction.

There are three rather than two moving objects in my review: (1) mainstream (that is, non-feminist) GPT; (2) mainstream (that is, non-green) feminist political thought; and (3) their hybrid, called ecological feminist thought, that emerged in the 1980s in response to the shortcomings of each. In the first part of the essay, I summarize the (en)tangled paths these objects, broad intellectual fields all, have followed since their emergence in the 1970s. I then suggest some reasons for why, in spite of their similarities and ‘natural’ affinities, there has been a lack of fruitful connection in the past 30 years. I argue that (1) remains largely gender-blind, (2) is largely environment-blind; and even the most sophisticated bits of (3) have been unfairly marginalized by (1) and (2). It is this last observation that I find most in need of critical examination. In the third part of the essay, therefore, I discuss how and why ecofeminist theory has tended to be reduced and traduced more than any other field of scholarship I know. I conclude by giving my own humble (and probably unsatisfying) answer to ‘where to go from here’.

Natural allies?

Space constraints demand the use of short cuts and boundaries. All three bodies of thought that I am discussing are themselves internally diverse and contested, with longer histories than I can describe here. I shall therefore work at a general level, and do so in ways that leading scholars in the field have
identified (for example, Dobson, 2007; Tong, 2007, 2009). Making generalizations comes with the expectation that some readers will think immediately of exceptions. I note some exceptions where relevant, but argue that these do not undermine my discussion of overarching trends and general directions.

My trajectories begin at the time of the establishment of academic feminist and green theory in the English-speaking world in the 1970s. Both emerged as intellectual arms of new social movements and entered universities in due course. FT and GPT share a common architecture: both express critiques of western intellectual traditions that have been exclusionary (that is, of women and nature); both express normative visions of better worlds based on the inclusion of the hitherto excluded; and both have strategies for getting ‘from here to there’. Academic environmentalism emerged to theorize and provide evidence of the causes and consequences of environmental degradation, developing a range of critiques of anthropocentrism (that is, the tendency in Enlightenment thought to put humans in general at the centre) in the process. Academic feminism emerged to theorize and provide empirical evidence of the causes and consequences of women’s oppression, naming patriarchy and androcentrism (that is, men in particular at the centre) as two key factors. Their trajectories have much in common.

When they became institutionalized in the early 1980s, in university departments and peer-reviewed journals, both fields engaged in theoretical debates over ideology and political strategy. There was fragmentation along ideological lines; within both FT and GPT different branches developed through affiliation with other, more established political ideologies. For example, there is socialist feminism and eco-socialism; liberal feminism and liberal environmentalism, among others. Ecofeminism emerges at this point in the trajectory, as a hybrid of feminism and ecologism with a focus on the gendered contours of environmental destruction. As a hybrid, it is both a green political theory and a feminist theory; it has always aimed to develop ‘a feminism that is ecological and an ecology that is feminist ...’ (King in Plumwood, 2006, p. 51). The rationale for ecofeminist interventions was (and is) that neither feminism nor environmentalism alone is able to address the interconnections that are at the root of the twin problems of gender inequality and ecological crisis. The foundational premise of ecofeminism is that ‘social oppression and environmental exploitation are inextricably linked to fundamental social constructs that have co-evolved with patriarchal power relations’ (Birkeland, 1995, p. 2). Ecofeminism has also been internally diverse. There are as many interpretations as there are scholars doing ecofeminist work, and many do work that fits the description but is not self-defined as ecofeminist. And within this hybrid creature there are further hybrids such as socialist ecofeminism and social ecofeminism (that is, ecofeminism merged with Bookchin’s social ecology). As we will see below, despite its internal diversity,
ecofeminism tends unfairly to be reduced to the simple idea that ‘women are closer to nature than men’.

In the 1980s both fields have experienced ‘world diversification’ (Dietz, 2003, p. 400) brought about by postcolonial challenges to elite, Western/Northern academic theorizing. Feminist and green theory were criticized for failing to investigate how experiences of ‘nature’ and the environment, and experiences of femininity and sexual oppression, are shaped by race/ethnicity, culture and class. The development of environmental justice scholarship and postcolonial/multicultural feminism has since given an academic place to activists and scholars who theorize the world from a diversity of perspectives. Prompted by these challenges, both feminist and green thought became increasingly preoccupied in the 1990s by questions about the subject of their political movements. *What is ‘woman’? What is ‘nature’?* Debates between realists and constructivists are well known in both fields. In FT, for example, the deconstruction by some of the category ‘woman’ has led to an ‘identity crisis in feminist theory’ (Alcoff, 1988). A similar, but probably less traumatizing, crisis has taken place among environmental theorists who try to answer ‘what is nature?’ (Soper, 1995; Burningham and Cooper, 1998). The constructivist turn in both fields has yielded sophisticated theoretical analyses and arguably some of their most creative work. But the cost has been heated debates about imperialism vs moral relativism and a diffusion of energy away from external battles for political change. Both have experienced fraught relationships with their activist colleagues for whom such conversations seem counterproductive and depoliticizing.

For much of the 2000s, both feminism and environmentalism have had the unsettling experience of reading their own obituaries. Their deaths have been proclaimed in recent publications, for example by Nordhaus and Shellenberger in *The Death of Environmentalism* (2004, 2007) and by Chesler (2005) in *The Death of Feminism*. The emergence of the concepts of ‘post-ecologism’ and ‘post-feminism’ stems from a growing sense that both movements have failed. The concept of post-ecologism has been used by critics who believe that radical ecological thought has had little impact on contemporary societies and that popular environmental awareness serves simply to ‘sustain the unsustainable’ (Blühdorn, 2007, 2000). ‘Post-feminism’ has emerged in part because many believe western feminists have won their battle for gender equality, and in part because younger women have different understandings of ‘empowerment’ than their second wave forebears (Baumgardner and Richards, 2000). There have been generational changes, but it may also be that neither movement has ever found the right language, symbols or strategies for persuading a majority of people that different ways of living are possible and necessary. Neither has accepted defeat, but both are now engaged in the kinds of retrospective/evaluative exercise that the articles in this special issue exemplify.
Throughout their evolution, GPT and FT have shared the experience of marginalization within the field of political theory. Although they are well-established academic fields, they are regarded as peripheral to the mainstream discipline and must fight a constant battle to be included into dominant analyses. Both compete for the last chapter in the ‘introduction to political ideologies’ textbook (Dobson and Eckersley, 2006, p. 1). Although Dobson and Eckersley (2006, p. 4) claim that ‘environmentalism is a little behind feminism in terms of both its own development and its wider impact …’, they would no doubt agree that neither is very far ahead in its effort to gain entry into the established ‘canon’ of political theory. Perhaps they share a reputation for being the type of scholars no one wants to invite to the theoretical party: the unrealistic, earnest environmentalist and the humourless, angry feminist. They should be natural allies, a match made in heaven. And yet.

Perennial foes?

FT and GPT have continued on their separate paths with relatively little to do with each other. With some exceptions, GPT has tended to ignore gender and FT has tended to overlook issues relating to the environment. Why is this so? Perhaps their difficult trajectories have made them protective of their own contested territories. Di Chiro (2008, p. 208) has recently suggested that the two struggle to come together ‘due to the problems of frontier effects – the impossibility of finding common ground in the risky terrain that ultimately comes down to ‘our issues versus your issues’. I offer three other possible explanations: (i) a green fight for survival that leaves no time for gender differences to be explored; (ii) a feminist flight from nature for fear of charges of ‘essentialism’; and (iii) an unfair reading of ecofeminist theory that allows both GPT and FT to avoid its important arguments about the relevance of gender to environmental politics and of the environment to feminist politics.

The green fight for survival

Green political theory (except for ecofeminism) has been minimally influenced by feminist theory. That it remains gender-blind has been well established. Banerjee and Bell (2007) note that ‘surprisingly-blind has been given to gender in the whole of the environmental social sciences. They provide as empirical evidence the findings of a CSA Illumina search of the five top journals (including Environmental Politics) where they found just 3.9 per cent of the articles published between 1980 and 2005 had ‘gender’, ‘sex’ or
‘feminism’ anywhere. For *Environmental Politics*, the leading journal in the field, and where most peer-reviewed work on GPT is published, that figure was just 2.2 per cent. A review of prominent textbooks on GPT demonstrates that gender as a social category and the existence of gender inequalities are sidelined or given cursory treatment in brief sections on feminism. With few exceptions, GPT has not taken seriously the role of masculinity and femininity in shaping environmental values and actions, nor has it critiqued the gendered division of environmental risks, benefits or labour, nor have many green theorists taken up the idea that nature has been constructed in gendered terms. This is in spite of nearly 30 years of ecofeminist theoretical offerings on precisely these issues.¹

One possible explanation for the generally insufficient amount of attention to gender issues in GPT is its assumption of a common humanity. The ‘anthro’ in anthropocentrism generally stands for *humans-in-general*. The human side of the ‘human–environment relationship’ is a homogeneous category. There have been few moves to specify which humans have been more involved in the project of *human* domination over nature, and there has been a tendency to claim that ‘we [humans] are all in the same boat’. Add to this the fact that ‘crisis’ and ‘tragedy’ have been dominant themes in green political discourse (Torgerson, 1999), as has the apocalyptic discourse of survivalism (Dryzek, 2005). For green theorists in the past who advocated authoritarian solutions, and those today who call for exceptional measures in the wake of climate change, there is apparently no time for a debate about ‘who is more oppressed than who’ when the lifeboat needs urgent bailing.

Being generous about it, then, one can understand how a ‘surviving-the-crisis’ approach might explain the postponement of thinking about difficult social and interpersonal issues like racism and male domination. As mentioned above, however, GPT has begun to change as a result of the critical interventions of environmental justice scholars. The contemporary climate change crisis, now dominating the environmental agenda, is a good example of how green theory has changed. Chapters in the recently published *Political Theory and Global Climate Change* (Vanderheiden (ed.), 2008) look at the effects of class and race on people’s vulnerability to climate change. Demonstrating a growing interest in ‘climate justice’, some authors explore the differential impacts of climate change on poor and racialized populations in the South (for example, coastal and small island communities) and poor communities in the affluent world (for example, poor African-American residents of New Orleans post-Katrina). But there is no mention anywhere in the collection about the gender dimensions of climate change or about the ways in which women in poor communities everywhere are particularly vulnerable. This is just one recent example, but the evidence shows that gender analysis is lacking in both policy making and research on climate change (MacGregor,
It is difficult to understand why it has been possible to include some social categories and not others (that is, gender) in the green political frame.

The feminist flight from nature

Feminist theorists (except for ecofeminists) have for a long time overlooked the politics of the environment and even now appear to avoid the crisis of climate change. I conducted a CSA Illumina citation search of 20 feminist journals from 1990 to November 2008, using the keywords ‘climate change’ and ‘global warming’ in the ‘words anywhere’ box. My search resulted in a total of just 10 articles, or 0.06 per cent of all articles published. Few have criticized this lacuna, including green political theorists.

An explanation for why feminists have generally tended to avoid environmental issues is developed by Alaimo (2000) who identifies a long tradition of feminism’s ‘flight from nature’. Feminist theorists since before the second wave have refuted the association of women and nature made in Western thought and science, including claims that women are inferior to men by ‘nature’ and that women’s ‘natural’ biological functions make them closer to nature than to culture. As Alaimo (2000, pp. 3–4) explains, ‘if woman’s perceived proximity to nature is responsible for her oppression, then her liberation, it would seem [to early feminists like Beauvoir], is contingent on her distance from nature’. The analysis of gender as a social construct that is different from biological sex has been a constructive outcome of this flight. Less constructive has been the fight over ‘essentialism’ between those who think the concept of ‘nature’ (however understood) is relevant to FT and those who dismiss this view as essentialist and therefore possibly not feminist.

FT’s fear of association with nature and thus with essentialism arguably has resulted in distorted understandings of both nature and feminism. As Mortimer-Sandilands (2008, p. 306) argues, ‘[the] use of essentialism as a dismissive label tout court is a form of disavowal through which some current strands of so-called third-wave feminism can forget the complex gender histories through which they themselves have been constituted – as if feminist politics can, somehow, demonstrate its own progress by showing what it has (obviously) left behind so completely’. Meanwhile, faced with reports of its own death and with no life-threatening crisis to make its goals urgent, FT has grown inward looking. For example, in a recent article on the evolution and future of feminism, Tong (2007, p. 23) makes no mention of environmental issues as part of the challenges that lie ahead. Rather, ‘the future of feminist thought depends on the ability to resolve the sameness-difference debate’. By
investing so much energy on internal debates about essentialism, identity, sexuality, and ‘the body’, it sometimes seems that FT has become oblivious to the state of the planet on which bodies depend.

**Dismissing ecofeminism**

Banerjee and Bell (2007) argue that there has been a ‘frosty reception’ to gender and feminism in the environmental social sciences because ecofeminism has been stigmatized. Even ‘mainstream’ feminists have distanced themselves from ecofeminism, they say, so it is understandable ‘that mainstream environmental social sciences have paid ecofeminist theory little heed’ (Banerjee and Bell, 2007, p. 5). So we can add the tendency to dismiss ecofeminism to the list of things feminist and green thought have had in common for decades. The reason for dismissal is the perception that ecofeminism is ‘essentialist’, ‘spiritualist’ and politically naive and therefore has nothing to offer to the serious projects of green or feminist theorizing. Without denying that some writers who have been associated with ecofeminism have produced work of dubious quality, I argue that its rejection by mainstream environmentalism and feminism has been sustained by a failure to appreciate the breadth of its contemporary offerings.

The portrayal of ecofeminism by academics in the field of environmental politics has been problematic. A striking example is an article in the journal *Environmental Politics* by Sargisson (2001) calling ecofeminism ‘frankly awful’, ‘fluffy’, intellectually ‘incontinent’ and a form of utopian ‘story-telling’. Rather than referring to work by ecofeminist philosophers and political theorists, Sargisson reduces the field to the work of non-academic and fiction writers from the 1980s like Starhawk and Le Guin. Few of the texts she cites were published after 1990, and few would be considered core reading by those knowledgeable about the field. Out-dated and selective representation of ecofeminist scholarship is a general problem, including in influential texts such as *Green Political Thought* (Dobson, 2007, fourth edition) and *The Politics of the Environment* (Carter, 2007, second edition) where the authors provide over-simplified explanations of 20-year-old debates. Little has been made of recent work that spans a vast range of issues beyond the question of women’s relationship to nature. For example, important ecofeminist insights have been offered on ecological economics (Perkins, 2007), green democracy (Sandilands, 1999), ecological citizenship (MacGregor, 2006), international environmental governance (Bretherton, 2003), human–animal relationships (Plumwood, 2003) and political activism (Sturgeon, 1999; Di Chiro, 2008). All of this work is swept aside, for example, in Carter’s section on ecofeminism which ends with the statement: ‘ecofeminism has made only a limited
contribution to ecologism because it offers no coherent vision of a green society and no clear strategy for feminist environmental action’ (Carter, 2007, p. 74).

Ecofeminism fares no better among its feminist sisters than it does with its green brothers, suffering from out-of-date descriptions and a ‘blanket condemnation … as essentialist’ (Alaimo, 2008, p. 299). As Mortimer-Sandilands (2008, p. 306) writes, ‘… there is tendency among some post-1990s feminist academics to assume that any activity at all bearing the label “ecofeminist” is also irremediably tainted by precisely the kinds of discourse that so much contemporary feminist politics has sought to de-nature’. It is particularly disheartening to see that, in the third edition of her Feminist Thought: A More Comprehensive Introduction (2009), Tong makes almost no changes to her chapter on ecofeminism to include new work from the past 10 years. Her loaded question of whether ecofeminism is a ‘new philosophy or ancient wisdom’ remains (unanswered), as do her references to the usual 1970s and 1980s suspects (for example, Starhawk, Dinnerstein). Few sections in the chapter have changed, although the section on ‘spiritualist ecofeminism’ now includes a detailed discussion of Carol Christ’s non-academic work on goddess worship.5 Again it appears that no effort has been made to include new ecofeminist work on topics of interest to contemporary feminist theorizing like embodiment (Field, 2000), queer and anti-racist theory (Gaard, 1997) and identity politics (Sturgeon, 1999). Tong’s (2009) chapter ends just as it did in 1998: she gives a mild endorsement of the main goals of ecofeminism but concludes that they are not much use to feminism because ‘most people, including most feminists, do not want to radically change the way they live’ (2009, p. 267).

Conclusion

Whereas few would accept that GPT and FT have stayed trapped in aspic and defined for eternity by their most radical voices (for example, the Andrea Dworkins or the Dave Foremans), it seems the same cannot be said for ecofeminism. When I read the descriptions mentioned above, I do not recognize my own work or the ecofeminist theory that has informed my thinking over the past decade. As noted earlier, ecofeminism is a broad and internally diverse field that offers a variety of theoretical and philosophical analyses of the interconnections between the subordination of women (and all things feminine) and the exploitation of the natural environment. Although some ecofeminists have theorized those interconnections in polemical and essentializing ways, most contemporary scholarship presents nuanced
and integrative arguments for why gender should not be left out of environmental analyses and vice versa. This work includes the themes of intersectionality (cf. Warren, 2000; Sturgeon, 1999); hybridity (cf Plumwood, 2003, 2006; Haraway, 1991); partnership ethics (Merchant, 2003); social reproduction (cf. Di Chiro, 2008) and feminist ecological citizenship (Sandilands, 1999; MacGregor, 2006). These substantive themes, and the arguments that underpin them, ought to be included in any description of ecofeminism. I would also give a prominent place to those ecofeminist theorists (past and present) who have argued for an end to the essentialism debate. As Mortimer-Sandilands (2008, p. 307) writes, ‘many ecofeminist writers and activists have specifically chosen to reject essentialist arguments and to work with a more broadly poststructuralist and/or genealogical feminist approach (Alaïmo, 2008), to understand ecofeminist essentialisms as strategic and politically situated (Sturgeon, 1999), and/or to engage actively in a questioning of maternalist discourses and relations as part of [ecofeminism] (MacGregor, 2006)’. It would be my hope that by including such themes it may be possible to forge a more fruitful FT–GPT alliance for the future.

If one point is taken away from this essay, it should be that the rich field of ecofeminist theory deserves a much better reading than it currently gets. Looking back over 30 years of ecofeminism’s evolution, Buckingham (2004) finds its most significant accomplishments to have been made in the policy arena. She cites ‘gender mainstreaming’ in environmental decision-making, particularly at the international level (for example, The Johannesburg Declaration on Sustainable Development), as evidence that ecofeminist arguments have made a difference. Perhaps she is right to be celebratory, but my review of what has gone on in academic circles for roughly the same period yields few reasons for optimism. The more I investigate the lack of change in the relationships between feminist, green and ecofeminist theory, the more depressed I become. While it may be true that the very existence of ecofeminism suggests that a productive engagement between GPT and FT is possible, it is frustrating that this engagement is so difficult (and professionally risky) to sustain. And although there are exceptions, there are strong reasons for saying that after all these years, unless ecofeminists raise it, gender still does not get the serious attention it deserves in GPT.

Where do we go from here? Overcoming the ‘ecofeminist stigma’ would be one suggestion. Another is to address the lack of constructive conversation between feminist, green and ecofeminist scholars. Perhaps we need to make opportunities for a constructive ‘trialogue’ – in the pages of a journal or on a panel at a conference, for example – where longstanding disconnections may be mended and different directions chosen.
Notes

1. One area where feminist theory has been taken up to some extent by some green political thinkers is the ethics of care, which has been considered as an alternative to liberal, rights-based approaches to justice that is relevant to the notions of sustainability and stewardship.

2. Gender’s absence from academic discourse on climate change is especially worrying from a feminist perspective, given that there are some influential green activists and experts who are seriously thinking (aloud, in the media) again about the urgent need for population control. Population control is an issue that feminists regard as dangerous territory no matter how ‘empowering’ the approach may be.

3. For exceptions see Dankleman (2002) and other articles in the special issue of Gender and Development 10(2), July 2002. See also Terry (2009) and several other articles in Gender and Development 17(1) 2009. It may be that a publication lag partly accounts for the apparent absence of work on gender and climate change in both feminist and environmental journals.

4. The late Val Plumwood noted this common misperception with frustration in 1993 on the first page of her book Feminism and the Mastery of Nature.

5. Christ is the self-described founder of the Goddess movement and a teacher at the ‘Ariadne Institute for the Study of Myth and Ritual’ in Crete. She has not been engaged in academic scholarship for well over 20 years. The word ‘ecofeminism’ does not appear in any of her biogs available on the Web or in her publisher’s descriptions of her books.

References


Nature gained a new kind of significance for political theory during the latter half of the twentieth century. With widespread perceptions of environmental crisis and the emergence of environmentalism in the public sphere, nature could no longer remain regarded simply as something subject to potential domination by human beings. Green political theory emerged as part of the challenges to the modern conception of nature, proposing that human beings realign themselves, in some sense, with the natural order. In the context of our concern here with ‘trajectories of green political theory’, I seek to reexamine the question of how we represent nature.

When speaking of green theoretical ‘trajectories’, do we not involve ourselves in something of a paradox? We acknowledge plurality in a way that resonates well with contemporary celebrations of diversity, yet we also presuppose a certain unity, or at least commonality, in what we call green political theory. If we look to the range of political discourses with which green political theory is now connected, we might immediately be struck by their differences, the tensions among them, the sometimes sharp and seemingly irreconcilable conflicts. Although green political theory has emerged historically from what could once simply be called ‘environmentalism’, we are now prone to perceive a range of ‘many environmentalisms’ (Torgerson, 2003).

Environmentalism has, of course, always had its differences, but the advent of perspectives such as ecofeminism and environmental justice have made differences pronounced, complicating efforts to conceive environmentalism as a coherent green movement. The differences similarly undercut the conception of green political theory as a project to secure the coherent identity and direction of the green movement. I thus propose that green political theory partially distance itself from the ‘green movement’ by mixing that metaphor for political and social activism with the metaphor of a ‘green public sphere’ (Torgerson, 1999, 2000). If we were to reorient green political theory in this way, we would not erase plurality, but would need to approach it differently.

Plurality is not a problem for the green public sphere, nor is it a problem to speak alternately of an interconnected plurality of green public spheres. The green public sphere is not some sharply bounded space of rational argumentation issuing in consensus, but a cultural and aesthetic intersection
of diverse voices. We might consider it a ‘“wild” complex’, as even Habermas would allow (1996, p. 307), or a ‘public culture’ involving an agreement to disagree, focused on matters not of knowledge, but – as Arendt would insist – of opinion (Sandilands, 1999, 2002). In order to understand the green public sphere in his way, I bring together threads from the work of William Leiss and John R. Rodman. Taken together, these significant – though now rather neglected – figures in the emergence of green political theory help to focus critical attention on the modern project of dominating nature and, particularly with Rodman, on ways of realigning the relationships of human/nature. Rodman’s affirmation of ‘ecological sensibility’ is presented here, however, not to end discussion, but as a point of departure in reconsidering how we represent nature, both politically and aesthetically. I argue that the question of representing nature anticipates a further reconsideration of the relationship between nature and politics. Just as the meaning of politics is a key question in contemporary political theory, so it has become for green political theory.

The Domination of Nature

Nature was conceived, in a sense designed, during the early modern period as a nature to be dominated. This design remained potent in the second half of the twentieth century, even while challenged from ecologically inspired perspectives. ‘It appears’, one account of the late 1960s claimed, ‘that a total control of nature is possible in the not very distant future’. Ecological claims that nature is ‘too complex’ simply indicate that science has not yet achieved that ‘complete description’ of nature necessary for ‘the controller’ to ‘freely manipulate’ nature (Murphy, 1967, p. 11). Such confidence that nature might soon be completely described and controlled is worth noting, but so too is the unexamined presupposition that there is such a discrete realm of ‘nature’. This notion points to a striking peculiarity of the modern design of nature. The earlier theological conception of a divinely created nature had displaced animistic and polytheistic traditions, establishing nature as an essentially unitary object, itself devoid of spirit even though created and ruled by a transcendent spirit (Leiss, 1974, pp. 29–35). The Cartesian dualism between subject and object, understood as a philosophical revision of the earlier theological opposition between spirit and nature, completed the picture of a disenchanted nature available for human domination.

In *The Domination of Nature*, William Leiss drew attention to the ‘pioneering work’ of Max Horkheimer in initiating a critique of the modern project of dominating nature (Leiss, 1974, pp. 81, 147–155). Although Georg Lukács had earlier depicted nature as ‘a societal category’ (1923/1971, p. 234),
Horkheimer went on to portray the modern concept of nature as exemplifying the inadequacy of the ‘logic of identity’ – a formalism to which all conceptualization was vulnerable when guided by the demands of exactitude and a ‘quest for certainty’ (Horkheimer, 1947/1974, pp. 167–168). He saw in the grand project of dominating nature a reductionism that rendered the project incomprehensible to itself.

That project has depended not only upon a reduction of nature to a determinate object that stands in opposition to an agent of control. The domination of nature also entails the domination of human beings, as in overt class and colonialist oppression. When the significance of such oppression is recognized, the domination of nature can no longer be understood simply as a collective project dedicated to the improvement of humankind. Yet the domination of human beings – indeed, of ‘human nature’ – extends beyond overt oppression. The domination of nature presupposes a rational agency that stands apart from nature to effect comprehension and control: a rational, autonomous agent is pictured as controlling a heteronomous nature (Horkheimer, 1947/1974, p. 107). The consequence is an ‘alienation’ of human beings ‘from extrahuman and human nature’ (p. 168; cf. Horkheimer and Adorno, 1944/1972, pp. 9, 33).

The modern concept of nature was explicitly developed on the analogy of governance. As Descartes wrote in a letter of 1630, ‘God sets up mathematical laws in nature as the king sets up laws in his kingdom’ (quoted in Merchant, 1983, p. 205). In the medieval Christian conception, humanity occupied a clear position in God’s natural order, one that anticipated the modern conception in that humans, made in God’s image as rational and spiritual beings, were placed in dominion over earthly creation (Leiss, 1974, pp. 29–35). Even though Christianity had displaced animistic and polytheistic traditions, there nonetheless remained an ethical limitation on human ‘earthly ambitions’ in that the earth was ‘a divine creation and therefore sacred’ (p. 34). The modern domination of nature, by contrast, involved a thorough disenchantment: nature was conceived in terms of uniform matter ordered by mechanical laws, and human beings were absolved of the ethical inhibitions imposed by the conception of the earth as a sacred creation.

Here modern civilization projects itself as a vast machine designed to dominate nature. When subjected to rationalistic discipline, the ‘possessive individual’ (Macpherson, 1964) enforces self-control, resisting impulses to indulge in luxurious consumption. Yet as industrialism progresses through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this domination of human nature for the sake of productive enterprise is attenuated by increased indulgence in consumption – especially as the capacity to indulge extends widely in the consumer society. Indeed, as Leiss suggests (1974, pp. 57, 156–158), the very project of dominating nature in expanding cycles of production and
consumption paradoxically comes to depend upon releasing human nature from prior constraints in order to stimulate consumption. The project of dominating nature comes to depend upon releasing and expanding human appetites. They ironically become an uncontrollable force of nature that defies limits and threatens the sustainability of the very civilization that seeks to dominate nature.

Psyche, Polis and Cosmos: A Return to the Natural Order?

John R. Rodman explicitly located his critique of the domination of nature in the context of an emerging ‘struggle to defend diversity against the juggernaut of mono-culture’ (1977, p. 114; cf. Torgerson, 1999, pp. 34–35, 99–100, 107–113). His critique of mono-culture and his defence of diversity were clearly influenced by ‘ecological models of nature’. Yet Rodman also disavowed an appeal to the science of ecology – and its ‘shifting sands’ – as a foundation (1983, p. 66). His appeal, rather, was to an ‘ecological sensibility’ that, although informed by ecological science, should primarily be understood in aesthetic terms. A student of Hegel and neo-Hegelian thought, Rodman identified a series of moments, both conceptual and historical, that he saw as developing in opposition to the domination of nature (1980; cf. 1964, p. 25). These moments – or ‘forms of ecological consciousness’ – involved concerns about the sustainability of natural resources, about the moral status of non-human nature, and about human identity in the face of wilderness. Developing through these various moments, ecological sensibility was distinguished by its aesthetic dimension and anticipated a potential reorientation of political theory. Rodman’s point was not to expel the aesthetic dimension from political theory, but to make it explicit, confronting the (an)esthetic of domination with the opposing aesthetic of ecological sensibility.

Rodman (1983) focused attention on the significance of analogy and mimesis – on the role, more broadly, of an aesthetic dimension – in the history of political theory. Explicitly central in ancient and medieval conceptions, this significance extended, albeit implicitly, to the modern project of dominating nature and, indeed, to efforts opposing that project. Taking Plato and Aquinas as prime examples, Rodman identified a common pattern of distinct yet analogous levels, a ‘metaphoric mirroring of psyche, polis, and cosmos’ (1976, p. 1) in their respective visions of a coherent natural order, governed by a common principle. With modernity, according to Rodman, the ‘overtly symbolic and analogical dimension’ of political theory is displaced (1983, p. 66), but this dimension is nonetheless implicitly retained. Now the image of mechanism emerges as a common feature – at the levels of the human
individual, human society and non-human nature – that binds together the project of dominating nature.

When Rodman first introduced his concept of ecological sensibility, he explicitly termed it a ‘metaphoric sensibility’ (1976, p. 3) that animates opposition to industrialist mono-culture and re-imagines the natural order in multiple dimensions: ‘We lack a suitable myth that comprehends and integrates our feelings and perceptions, articulates our intuitions, allows our actions ritual status, and makes us intelligible to ourselves in terms of an alignment with a larger order of things’ (1977, p. 112). Ecological sensibility entails not some unitary ‘myth’, however, but an imaginative interplay of diverse perspectives and experiences.

From the influence of ecology, Rodman identifies a ‘cluster of ecological values’, including ‘diversity, complexity, integrity, harmony, stability, scarcity’ (1980, pp. 90–91). Yet ecological sensibility further involves a recognition and defence of diverse ‘structures and potentialities’ that, although typically ignored, can be seen clearly enough ‘if we will but look’ (p. 89). Even though ecological science has often drawn attention to the diversity, complexity and unpredictability of natural systems, it also exhibits – as a development of modern science – contrary tendencies toward reductionism, combined with efforts to enlist it in the industrialist management of natural resources (McIntosh, 1986, p. 17). Ecological sensibility, in contrast, depends upon an engagement with images, perspectives and experiences that disclose ‘a naturally diverse self-and-world’ (Rodman, 1978, p. 56). Understood in aesthetic terms, the notion of ecological sensibility brings us to the question of how to represent nature. We now turn to this key question of green political theory.

Representations of Nature: Political and Aesthetic

With its challenge to the modern conception, green political theory makes the representation of nature a central issue. Significantly influenced by Rodman, the ‘ecocentric’ approach particularly criticizes the failure of modern political theory to recognize any potential for nature to appear politically (for example, Eckersley, 1992).² People appear and are represented politically, but not nature. Acknowledging the ingenious efforts of numerous green political theorists, Michael Saward suggests that the problem is bound to resist resolution so long as political representation is conceived the way it typically has been by political theorists. The quest for ‘authentic representation’ (2006b, p. 306), he argues, depends upon the problematic notion of ‘a fixed, knowable set of interests’ (p. 301). Saward instead portrays representation as ‘a precarious and curious sort of claim about a dynamic relationship’ (2006b,
p. 298). He makes a cultural and aesthetic connection to political representation through attention to language.

Without denying the ‘referent, or extradiscursive reality’, Saward maintains that what gets taken up in discourse is not a referent per se, but an ‘object’ or a ‘concept’ — in other words, a cultural and aesthetic representation (2006a, p. 185). Attention to what representation means, culturally and aesthetically, was left out of earlier approaches. Once this question is addressed, the ‘role of the representative’ becomes ‘necessarily creative’, demanding that we ‘construct, reconstruct, choose, depict, and portray’ whatever we represent (2006a, p. 189). Whether the task is to represent human beings or non-human nature, there can be no direct, literal correspondence between the referent and the representation. Green political theory has in effect offered a range of ‘metaphors or representations of nature’ that are ‘aesthetically compelling and culturally resonant’ (2006a, p. 196). Saward calls for a discourse, at once political and aesthetic, that continues to open up ‘a richer variety of representations’ (2006a, p. 196).

The modern representation of nature does not imagine the appearance of nature other than as an object to be controlled. This is a cultural and (an)esthetic representation, in other words, that excludes political representation. In its extreme formulation, as we have seen, this representation anticipates the ‘total control’ of nature through a ‘complete description’. Yet to speak of controlling nature through a complete description is to forget that the project of the technological control of nature develops out of magical practices of the Renaissance (Leiss, 1974, pp. 35–44). Here the image of the magus looms large as the agent controlling natural forces. A connection to animistic traditions of supplication is retained through the deployment of spells, incantations and elixirs to call forth and direct latent and secret forces. The project of dominating nature proceeded, that is, not by completely describing nature, but by making nature disclose ‘her’ secrets (cf. Merchant, 1983). In his famous formulation of this project in *Discourse on Method*, Descartes — associated with the ‘aura of a master magician’ in his own time (Leiss, 1974, p. 75) — speaks indeed of achieving mastery through knowledge specifically of ‘the force and action of fire, water, air, the stars, heavens and all other bodies that environ us’ (Descartes, 1637/1975, p. 119). The methodological principle of radical doubt sweeps away culturally grounded images, impressions and conceptions in favour of a fabulous null hypothesis that first empties the external world and then accepts only what can be constructed through scientific investigation. The world of appearances and opinions is cleared away so that technology can develop on the basis of genuine knowledge (cf. Arendt, 1958, chapter 6).

The task of modern science becomes that of constructing nature as an object of both knowledge and control. This is accomplished by identifying and
describing relationships among elementary units in terms of efficient causality. Nature in this scientific representation can thus be controlled through a ‘magic’ that works. The extraordinary accomplishments of modern technology dramatically demonstrate the power of this reductive representation, yet the appearance of unanticipated environmental problems does suggest limits (Dryzek, 1987).

Green political theory promotes a change in the modern representation of nature by disputing two presuppositions that have guided the advance of industrialism: (1) that human beings have the collective capacity to dominate nature and (2) that dominating nature is a right, perhaps even a responsibility, of human beings. For the ecocentric approach, the key concern is how non-human nature might gain the status of a ‘democratic subject’ (Hay, 1994). Yet, in a critique of the ecocentric approach, Albert Weale found it necessary to state the obvious: ‘Democracy is a discursive practice and other species, let alone other types of non-living entities are not (yet?) able to participate in that practice’ (Weale, 1993, p. 342). If non-human nature can have no part in political discussion, can it is nonetheless still have political representation? The question is not how to achieve some ‘direct engagement with nature’, according to Saward, but how human beings are to acknowledge and accept their inescapable role in representing nature – a task that is both aesthetic and political: ‘Politics brings varied representations of nature into play’ (2006a, p. 196). The problem of representing nature, indeed, suggests a need for green political theory to reconsider the meaning of politics.

Nature and Politics

Nature is now a political question, following two ‘waves’ of environmentalism in which public attention and activism focused on previously unanticipated problems in the human quest to control nature (Paehlke, 1992; Torgerson, 2003). The first wave arose in the late 1960s and early 1970s and was accompanied by early contributions to the emergence of green political theory. Following two decades of limited yet significant institutionalization of environmentalist initiatives, the second wave came in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and it was in this context that green political theory was recognized and named (for example, Paehlke, 1989; Dobson, 1990; Eckersley, 1992; Goodin, 1992). Even though just about every ‘ism’ has had something to say about its relevance to environmental problems (for example, Dobson and Eckersley, 2006; cf. Torgerson, 1999, chapters 2–3), green political theory now tends to focus on a democratic solution that would enhance public discourse and debate (Smith, 2003; cf. Torgerson, 2008).
While green political theory has gone far in challenging the modern conception of nature, it has largely taken for granted prevailing conceptions of politics. In particular, reformist tendencies revolve about a ‘functional’ notion of politics (oriented to the enhanced operation of an established socio-economic system) while more radical tendencies revolve about a ‘constitutive’ notion of politics (oriented to the transformation of an existing order and the creation of a new one). Hannah Arendt has conceived politics, by contrast, as a form of action centring on ‘debate’ in an art of performance, oriented not to knowledge, but to a ‘judicious exchange’ of opinions (1968, pp. 241, 223). Especially with this stress on the significance of opinion, Arendt’s ‘performative’ politics becomes relevant to green political theory (cf. Torgerson, 1999, 2000, 2008).

Climate change issues, for example, are typically posed in terms of scientific knowledge, but they actually serve to underscore the significance of opinion. However much a diagnosis of the climate problem or a prescription for its solution might be associated with the cultural authority of science, neither is a matter of scientific knowledge. Both, rather, are matters of expert opinion. Significantly reducing greenhouse gas emissions would in principle, as massive effort to deliberately influence the climate, constitute a grand experiment in the form of planetary engineering. This is not to reject that solution. The whole project of dominating nature was itself an even grander experiment, and its spirit continues with explicit proposals for ‘geoengineering’ solutions (for example, Randerson, 2008). Positioning satellites in space to block sunlight or fertilizing the oceans to absorb carbon dioxide with algae blooms are notions that recall the image of the magus or suggest the related science fiction figure of the ‘mad scientist’.\(^3\) With climate change, as typically with environmental problems, we encounter not just risk and uncertainty, but enormous ‘ignorance’ (Weinberg, 1972; Gibson, 1992). Efforts to portray expert opinion as scientific knowledge are commonplace, of course, but emphasizing the distinction is important for environmental politics because the relationship between expert and non-expert opinion has emerged here as a central problem (Fischer, 2000; cf. Torgerson, 2007).

With nature posed as a political issue, political theory faces a question involving not so much the role of scientific knowledge as the significance of opinion. The turn of green political theory to the problem of enhancing democratic discourse and debate might be cast as an effort to enhance political practice through a judicious exchange that shapes and shares opinions. How is ‘nature’ to be represented? In a political context, this very question challenges the ‘abstractness of modern science’, that ‘model of a silent, colorless universe of matter in motion’, which ‘in the final analysis remains mute in the theatre of human behavior’ (Leiss, 1974, p. 132). Recalling Saward’s point that politics involves the interplay of ‘varied representations of nature’, we can conclude
that opinions about the representation of nature involve the aesthetic question of how a ‘silenced’ nature is to be heard and how its unseen structures and potentialities are to be rendered visible (Dryzek, 1990; Manes, 1992; Saward, 2006a, p. 190).

Rodman’s affirmation of ecological sensibility, modelled on a dialectics of consciousness, provides a potential source of orientation and an opening for varied voices, but not an end point. Nor is it clear that there is an end point. Although green political theory emerged with the advent of environmentalism, the past several decades have been marked by the appearance of many environmentalisms – including the perspectives, for example, of ecofeminism, environmental justice, indigenous traditions, and the environmentalism of the poor (Torgerson, 2003, 2006). Conceived in terms of this diversity, the green public sphere does not culturally revolve about any single representation of nature. The various voices do all, nonetheless, challenge the authoritative status of the representation that has guided the modern project of dominating nature.

Notes

1 See Habermas (1974, p. 51): ‘If the theoretically based point of departure for the Ancients was how human beings could comply practically with the natural order, the practically assigned point of departure for the Moderns is how human beings could technically master the threatening evils of nature’ (cf. Strauss, 1953; Long, 2005).
2 The problem of political appearance is posed in contrasting ways by Arendt (1958) and Rancière (1998).
3 Readers of Kurt Vonnegut’s novel Cat’s Cradle may recall, for example, the properties of ‘ice-nine’.
4 See the work of Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands (for example, Sandilands, 1999, 2002; Mortimer-Sandilands, 2009).

References


