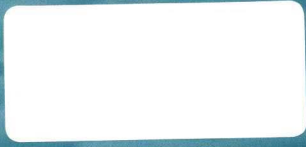


ROUTLEDGE REVIVALS



The Green Case

A Sociology of Environmental
Issues, Arguments and Politics

Steven Yearley



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The Green Case

First published in 1991, this title provides a comprehensive and objective account of the basis of 'green' arguments and their social and political implications. By the beginning of the 1990s, environmental awareness had become widespread, popular, and fashionable throughout the West, adopted by politicians, manufacturers and advertising agencies. The book sets out to explain why and how the 'green wave' developed, and examines the forces still shaping green politics and policies at an international level. With important implications across the fields of Sociology, Development Studies and Environment and Sustainability, this reissue will be valuable to a broad student and academic readership.

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INTRODUCTION

Studying the green case

By the end of the 1980s environmental awareness had become widespread, popular and fashionable throughout the Western world. In Eastern Europe the environmental cause had become closely identified with movements campaigning for a reduction in the power of the state. This confluence is perhaps best expressed in the name of the Bulgarian environmental protest group 'Ecoglasnost' (*Guardian* 2 November 1989, p. 7). It is now good to be 'green'. The environment is suddenly on everybody's agenda: it has been adopted by politicians, by manufacturers, by teachers, by advertising agencies and by publishers. This book sets out to explain why the 'green wave' has started rolling now and to examine the forces shaping the future of green politics and policies on an international scale.

Politicians seldom act without thought of electoral advantage so the scramble by parties of right and left to display their policies as environmentally friendly stands as testimony to the perceived public interest in the environment. In Britain, probably the most conspicuous reflection of this interest was the pair of speeches made in late September and early October 1988 by the Conservative Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher. In these two addresses, one to the Royal Society (the UK's foremost scientific society), the other to the Conservative Party Conference, she sought to align Tory traditionalism with conservation. Labour politicians responded by emphasizing the link between their penchant for social interventionism and the kinds of regulation needed to protect the environment. Seemingly incontestable evidence of growing public enthusiasm was also supplied by the electoral performance of the UK's Green Party in the 1989

elections for the European Parliament, in which they captured an unexpectedly large share (14.5 per cent) of the vote.¹ Being seen as reasonably 'green' is an increasingly successful political strategy.

Sensitive to public opinion as they may be, politicians are not quite as responsive as people who have to court the public on a day-by-day basis, including the media and advertisers. Advertising agencies' attempts to win the 'green consumer' are a rich resource for the analyst of changing social attitudes, both because their work has to be arresting and attractive in its own right, and because advertisements often carry a heavy burden of implicit meanings or connotations. Humorous treatments of environmental issues quickly appeared: the British motor company Vauxhall (a subsidiary of General Motors) sought to cash in on two fashions of 1989 by describing its convertible model as 'lid free'. Soft tops were in vogue as were campaigns to promote the use of lead-free petrol; the slogan marries the fashions.

More elaborately, during 1989 the French-based company Peaudouce ran a series of advertisements for their nappies, promoting them because the dressings were not made from chlorine-bleached materials. The use of chlorine as a bleaching agent can lead to the formation of compounds in the product which may be injurious to the user's health; related toxic compounds can also be discharged into the environment from the effluent. Beneath a picture of a smiling toddler, happily swathed in such a nappy, was the caption, 'eau-zone friendly' (comparable wit was displayed by the manufacturers of 'Right Guard' deodorant who labelled their product as 'nose-zone friendly').

Although the pun is rather contrived, the advertisement is revealing in a number of ways. First, it works on the assumption that shoppers will know about the supposed dangers of the use of chlorine. This issue is not addressed in the text of the advertisement. Second, it seems to presume that danger to health, and possibly the wider question of toxic discharges from the manufacturing by-products, are of the greatest importance to people; thus, the price and effectiveness of the product are not mentioned in this advertisement. Finally, and most revealing, it is assumed that people will know about threats to the ozone

layer and about the preceding campaign to persuade shoppers to buy only 'ozone-friendly' aerosols (sprays which are not propelled by CFCs, see Chapter 1) *and* that they will class this as a related issue. In other words it seems to be assumed that consumers regard environmental issues as linked and that their concerns about these problems are mutually reinforcing.

WHAT IS GREEN?

The rise of environmental awareness is clearly a social phenomenon of major proportions. As I have already said, one aim of this book is to clarify and explain how and why this awareness has developed. At the same time it is important not to take for granted the coherence of the green phenomenon. As the Peaudouce case illustrates, there appears to be a set of problem issues which have become associated in the public mind. Of course, both chlorine bleaching and the depletion of the ozone layer can readily be interpreted as central environmental problems. It is probably possible to identify a list of more-or-less agreed central environmental issues. And the sense that they are closely related is no doubt enhanced by some of the complexities thrown up by the natural world. Thus, concern about ozone has entered the public's conscience through the destruction of the ozone layer, high up in the atmosphere. But our technologies also cause ozone gas to be produced in the lower atmosphere. For example, it is formed by the electrical discharges in photocopiers and by the interaction of exhaust fumes with ultra-violet radiation from the sun (*Guardian* 29 January 1990, p. 17). Low-level ozone is a possible health risk; it also contributes to global warming. Relatively high concentrations of low-level ozone are found in the 'photochemical smogs' formed over large, traffic-filled cities (this pollution is also known by the name 'Los Angeles smog'). With the rise in concern over low-level ozone, environmentalists have the difficult job of persuading the public, newly informed of the value of this gas, that its accidental production at ground level is as undesirable as its unplanned depletion high in the atmosphere.

Such overlaps may cause confusion. But they also indicate how difficult it is to put a boundary round environmental questions, to determine what is a green issue and what is not. And this boundary problem is further exacerbated by commercial concerns which have discovered the consumer appeal of ecologically sound and 'natural' products. These businesses have accordingly tried to lever as many products as possible into the range of items seen as environmentally related. An astonishing range of products is now described as 'environment friendly', 'friendly to wildlife' or full of 'natural goodness'. In Britain we have long had the benefit of 'natural yoghurt'; in this case natural appears to be a flavour, since such yoghurts can still be called 'natural' even if they are well stocked with preservatives. In 1989, Tate and Lyle's white sugar bore the legend, 'granulated cane sugar' while underneath in facsimile handwriting was printed, 'from natural cane'. Conceivably, the sugar processing company was keen to dispel the notion that white sugar was a synthetic, purely industrial product. But the caption does appear to imply that there could be such a thing as *unnatural* cane.

The food industry has clearly found the notion of naturalness attractive; many consumers are after all increasingly concerned about the connection between diet and health. But these producers have been joined by the world of interior design (paints now come in natural shades) and by the cosmetics industry. Nearly all cosmetics offer to lend a natural beauty (on 'natural' beauty and femininity see Williamson 1978, pp. 123–37). In the new merchandising cosmology, products seem either to be natural or non-natural. The former are good, the latter are to be avoided. Of course, some products can be sold as non-natural – as 'made things' – and their artefactuality celebrated. In British commercials, Volkswagen has cleverly advertised its cars as being full of preservatives and thick with colourings. But in general, manufacturers are presenting more and more products as natural. Indeed, as will be seen in Chapter 3, products whose connection with issues such as global warming or ozone depletion is very remote or non-existent are presented as contributing to the green revolution.²

Even setting aside these over-imaginative extensions of the notion, it is hard to define which issues are green ones and which are not. Thus, it would be quite reasonable to accept that

wildlife conservation groups (such as the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) or the Marine Conservation Society) and more general environmental protection organizations (like Greenpeace) are central to the movement. But the status of other groups is more contentious. Simply as an illustration, the Vegetarian Society has much in common with the green movement and there are influential environmental arguments for vegetarianism; but not all environmentalists are vegetarian, neither are all vegetarians environmentally active. Another well-known example is the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA). It clearly has much in common with nature conservation organizations and works with them in opposing such practices as badger-baiting and in rescuing animals from environmental disasters. But its focus tends to be on individual animals rather than on species or habitats; its brief is not an environmental one. Then again there are groups with interests in aspects of the environment because of the amenities it offers: groups representing the interests of ramblers, climbers and even mountain-bikers. There are also those whose aim it is to preserve the beauty of the countryside rather than to safeguard wildlife *per se*.

Amongst the most difficult cases to classify are those presented by various sporting associations. The case of fox hunting is very well known: its proponents argue that the practice of hunting has actually benefited nature conservation since areas of woodland have been left as 'cover' for foxes, and because foxes have not been hunted to extinction. Opponents of fox hunting argue that it is responsible for the barbaric death of particular foxes and that it promotes an exploitative, destructive attitude to wildlife. A very similar debate continues over wildfowling. Shooters maintain that they have an interest in preserving viable populations of their quarry and that they have extensive knowledge about the birds they hunt. Nature conservationists are often sceptical. Still, wildfowlers participate in nature conservation groups, even in bird counts. Moreover, the shooters' society – the Wildfowling Association of Great Britain and Ireland – recently changed its name to the British Association for Conservation and Shooting (Nicholson 1987, p. 44), thereby signalling – depending on one's view – the society's adoption of either conservationist goals or conservationist rhetoric. Anglers have

yet to face this issue on a large scale (except in the matter of lead weights, which were linked to bird deaths, in particular fatalities amongst swans) but similar problems can be anticipated for them too.

It is not my ambition in this book to adjudicate in such matters. This is not a moral or philosophical treatise, since I have no special authority in such areas on which to call.³ Rather, my aim is to explain how a variety of social, commercial and political forces have acted to shape the agenda of the green movement, how some issues have risen to prominence while others have suffered relative neglect.

SHAPING THE MEANING OF GREEN

The factors involved in this explanation are very diverse. There are large-scale political and commercial influences. The adoption of green issues, in particular the protection of the ozone layer, by the Conservative Party has already been mentioned. A comparable action, raising the profile of green issues, has been the competition among British supermarkets to woo the green (and probably affluent) consumer. Other highly influential actions have been undertaken much less publicly. In response to increasing unease in the Western world about toxic wastes, there has developed an international trade in waste which relocates the problem into the Third World. Those responsible for safeguarding the Western world's environment in this way have been slow to seek publicity and civic gratitude for their labours.

There have also been less dramatic but possibly equally consequential actions. Television coverage of a range of environmental issues, but in particular of natural history, is believed to have played a large part in shaping public attitudes to wildlife (Nicholson 1987, pp. 78–80). Hundreds of environmental groups and campaign organizations have been active, even just within the UK, in the last fifteen years. As will be seen in Chapter 2, the fate and influence of these groups has sometimes been affected by overt political and commercial decisions, sometimes by government policy; but it has also been shaped by the local circumstance and even the personal qualities of members.

In studying the shaping of the environmental movement it is important not to restrict one's enquiries to the *actions* of players in the environmental game. One should also take account of the influence exerted by structures and institutions. In particular, it is important to examine the impact of voting systems on the development of environmental pressure groups and politics. In general, as will be seen in Chapter 3, where the electoral system operates solely on a 'first past the post' system, green parties have found it hard to establish themselves. In turn this has had implications for the vitality of environmental pressure groups. Although the electoral system is a clear example of a crucial institutional context, there are other examples, not least aspects of tax, company and charity law which have influenced the activities pressure groups have been able to undertake.

The last, and in many respects most important, question about the shape of the green movement is the extent to which the problems it identifies are treated in an international context. Much of the recent green wave has risen in Europe (but see Hays 1987); certainly it is the pressure groups, politicians, advertising agencies and media of the West who are responsible for bringing green issues to the forefront of our attention. But, as I mentioned, green issues have been very important for the democracy movements in Eastern Europe also. Equally, the practice of dumping the West's toxic waste in the Third World highlights the significance of environmental issues to developing countries and to international trading relations. It is important to assess green issues not solely with respect to their likely impact on our lives – our health, wealth and surroundings – in the West. One has to consider their impact, and the impact of the 'solutions' we propose for our own problems, on the Third World.

As we shall see in Chapter 5, the environmental problems of the Third World are severe. In the words of the United Nations report on environment and development (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987, p. 22): 'Developing countries face the obvious life-threatening challenges of desertification, deforestation, and pollution, and endure most of the poverty associated with environmental degradation.' The report (commonly termed the Brundtland Report, after the Commission's chairperson, the former Prime Minister of

Norway) makes clear the intimate connections between environmental issues and the enduring problems of poverty and lack of development. As I shall argue, a concern with the Third World's environment – far from a distraction from the economic and political needs of its people – is essential if those needs are to be properly addressed.

THE STATUS OF THE GREEN CASE

The last general issue to be taken up in this Introduction is the status or standing of green arguments. By this I do not mean the moral correctness of shooting or of the preservation of particular species; I have, as I have said, no particular authority in this matter. What I can describe, however, is the kind of appeal that the green case has for certain groups in society and the kinds of authority that green activists claim for their own arguments.

The first of these can be illustrated by the point just made about the significance of green matters to the Third World. Many on the left of politics, concerned to prioritize the alleviation of poverty and deprivation in both the First and Third Worlds, have tended to regard environmental issues as the preserve, at best, of the 'soft left'. At worst, environmentalism may be viewed as an attempt by the already wealthy to protect their own surroundings under the guise of preserving wildlife or the countryside. In this regard, as Rootes notes, left-wing parties may face a difficulty in introducing environmental protection policies that inhibit growth: 'Socialist parties [may be] hamstrung . . . they are propelled by ideological commitment and part of socialist ideology dictates that economic development is essential to the betterment of the condition of the working class' (Rootes 1990, p. 10). However, once it is shown that environmental improvements can benefit the poor, in fact that they can benefit the poor most of all, this distrust of green politics tends to disappear. After all, as Lowe and Rüdiger (1986, p. 523) note, 'working-class people are usually more exposed to environmental hazards than others'. As will be seen in Chapter 5, the study of Third-World problems makes this point very clearly.

Second, there is the question of the authority claimed by green activists. An important point to which I shall return several

times is the role of factual, scientifically based claims in the green case. Many social movements in this century have been based on moral or religious claims: for example, that abortion is morally wrong, that civil rights should be extended to minority populations or that God meant women to join (or be excluded from) the priesthood. While there are moral claims associated with the green case, it is also highly dependent on specifically scientific and technical considerations. In particular it depends on scientific predictions about, for instance, what would happen if we destroyed the ozone layer. I shall argue that the green case is unusually dependent on scientific authority and that this fact lends the movement peculiar weaknesses as well as strengths.

Finally, in this Introduction, is an outline of the book's contents. Chapter 1 offers an outline of the leading environmental issues as they are perceived in the 1990s. The next chapter traces the way in which the green case has come to public attention, focusing specifically on the role played by environmental organizations and pressure groups. The wider politics of the green movement in the West is the subject of Chapter 3; it examines public interest in the environment, the response of political parties and the (occasionally cynical) adaptation of industry and commerce to 'green consciousness'. This is followed by a study of the role of scientific authority in the green movement and in environmental controversies. Chapter 5 concerns the connection between environmental problems and social and economic development in the Third World. The Third World is the location of some of the most pressing environmental problems: for example, apart from those in Australia, all the world's rain forests are there. But, even in less obvious ways, the connection is still very important. Many Third-World economies depend on such extractive or primary industries as mining, logging, or farming. These have enormous environmental impacts. Also industrialization in the underdeveloped world would have huge consequences for the production of pollutants; carbon dioxide emissions and the production of ozone-unfriendly chemicals would both increase greatly. Moreover, the First World exercises a great influence over the course of Third World development. Commonly, it is either Western banks and agencies which are funding development projects or it is Western firms which are locating aspects