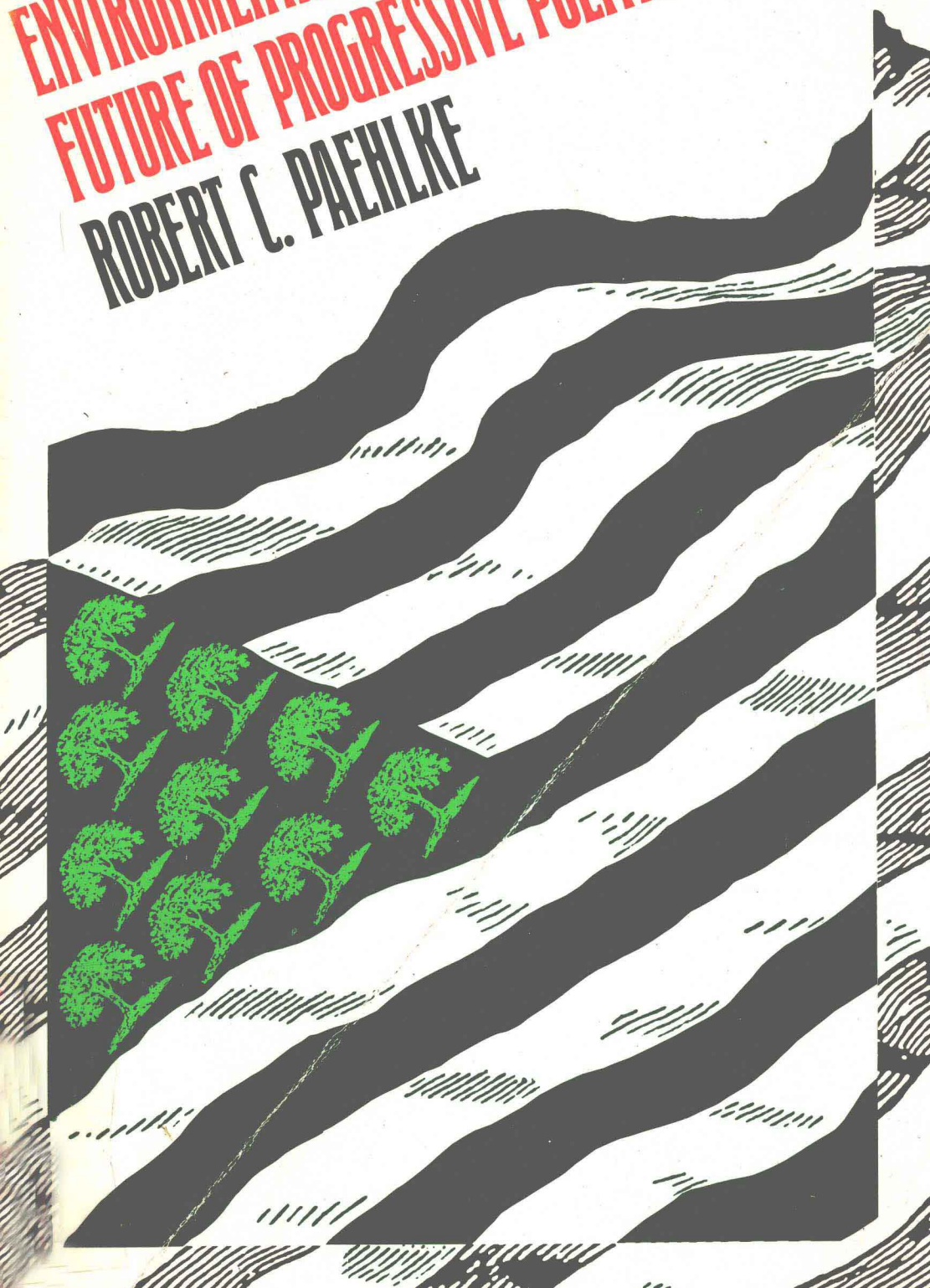


**ENVIRONMENTALISM AND  
THE  
FUTURE OF PROGRESSIVE POLITICS**  
**ROBERT C. PAEHLKE**



**E**ncvironmentalism  
and the Future  
of Progressive Politics

Robert C.  
Paehlke

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**Environmentalism  
and the Future  
of Progressive Politics**

**For my parents  
and my children**

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## chapter I

# Environmentalism without Apocalypse

Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity.

W. B. Yeats  
"The Second Coming"

**S**ome environmentalists in the 1960s and 1970s saw the future as an inevitable hell, others as a likely paradise. The pessimists feared that the future promised nothing but a return to the world envisioned by Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) in which society was “a war of all against all” and life was “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short.” The near-paradise of the optimists was envisaged as decentralized, bucolic, and organic, built on a wholesome communalism based somehow on solar energy, Jeffersonian democracy, and crunchy granola. The reality of the now waning millennium is, of course, proving less straightforward than either vision suggested.

A notable characteristic of environmentalism in the 1960s and 1970s was that it was often apolitical. Some environmentalists, labeled cosmetologists by Allan Schnaiberg, equated environmental protection with litter cleanup and scenic plantings. The problem for them was wholly aesthetic, the solution offensive to no one. Another group saw environmental problems as multidimensional and serious but consciously rejected politics in favor of voluntaristic, individualistic solutions—a simpler life-style, a back-to-the-land rejection of the material glut of contemporary society. However, most who

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sought such autonomy discovered, as did the native peoples of the Black Hills, James Bay, and the Mackenzie Delta, that the consumer society eventually came calling, even if one had not left a forwarding address.

Many of the most apolitical environmentalists found themselves swept into a reluctant politicization when they encountered, for example, a hazardous waste dump upstream from their bucolic retreat. But the environmental politics most often and most effectively practiced in the 1970s and early 1980s was largely a politics of single-issue negativism. People had not abandoned the freeway life-style only to stand by while a nuclear waste dump or multi-lane highway was built next to their organic vegetable patch. But lacking still for many who have a sympathy for environmental protection is an overview that is at once political and yet disinclined to either easy paradise or, if you will, easy apocalypse.

I describe in this book a view of the future that is both more and less than that offered by the environmentalists of the 1970s. It is less because neither ecological doom nor the straightforward recovery of a preindustrial sense of community and comfort with economic limits seems as likely now as during the initial moments of environmental awareness. The world of the 1980s, while somewhat more restrained in its use of resources, entails a less precipitous and consistent decline than was anticipated by early commentators. The energy conservation necessary to avoid an economic tumble has proven easier than most imagined in the early 1970s. Indeed, one might argue that energy conservation may now be a threat to its own parent, the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). In the rich countries almost all of the economic costs of rising energy prices have been borne, thanks to the rise of neoconservatism, by the young, the poor, and those industrial workers trapped in declining industries. These same people have also borne most of the costs of both disinvestment and advancing automation. On balance, however, the future promises to be less dramatic and draconian than the pessimistic environmentalists had anticipated.

An environmentalism without a millennial dimension, however, may turn out to be a much more important movement than was anticipated in the early years. Environmentalism, I attempt to show,

has been underestimated, even by its adherents. It provides a very useful base from which to make individual life choices, from which to take collective political action, and from which to decide a surprisingly broad range of public policy issues. Environmentalism even has the potential to become the first original ideological perspective to develop since the middle of the nineteenth century.

This book treats analytically both environmentalism as it is today and its potential as an effective set of ideas. I attempt herein to develop a political theory with ideological potential. The word *environmentalism*, as I use it, is a construct drawn from the ideas of many individuals, only a few of whom might accept the whole perspective I create. Few political actors now march under this banner; whether more will in the future is difficult to foresee. Indeed, I assume that few, if any, will follow these ideas exactly as I have developed them.

This book, then, is about environmentalism as politics. It is not about the Green Party but about "green" ideas—their evolution, meaning, and importance. Environmentalism has already played an important part in the political life of Europe and North America for several decades. In practice the movement has not usually been more than a loose coalition of interest groups. But if we look deeper than day-to-day practice, environmentalism can be understood as an evolving set of political ideas. It can be developed into an ideology able to see the developed economies through the difficult transition from an industrial to a post-industrial society, much as liberalism, conservatism, and socialism saw us through the formation of a new society during the Industrial Revolution.

Yet environmentalism as an ideology still lacks the mass following that conservatism, liberalism, and socialism in their time attracted; and it is by no means certain to attract such a following. In order to do so, environmentalists must develop clear and consistent positions on the full range of political and social issues. Environmentalism thus far has been a truncated ideology, with both intense and mass support in many countries, but only addressing a very narrow set of issues. A full development of environmental ideas—an environmentalist ideology—becomes possible only when environmentalism is seen as neither "left" nor "right." I try to show that such

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an assertion is more than a mere slogan. By clarifying the meaning of the notions of "left" and "right" in this context, I seek to develop a consistent and clear environmental position on a full range of important political and social issues. In doing so I direct my discussion at several audiences, bearing in mind the views both of scholars in several subfields (environmental policy, political theory and ideology, and social and political movements) and of the more general public, including environmentalists and moderate (or even not so moderate) political progressives.

If we extend the logic of environmentalism into the contemporary political setting, we find an important and distinctive point of view with regard to such issues as employment and unemployment, feminism, social welfare expenditures, government deficits, inflation, and economic development in the so-called third world. Obviously there will not be a single position on each of these issues that everyone concerned about the environment will automatically embrace. But there is a limited range of consistent possibilities and, potentially, a dominant set of themes that might well appeal to broad sections of the public as a whole. Thus environmentalism can be developed into an ideology as coherent as any of the three classical ideologies of liberalism, conservatism, and socialism. And it may be more effective than either of the contemporary Western ideologies, which I call neoconservatism and progressivism.

Before I develop further the links between environmentalism and these two contemporary ideologies, let me briefly discuss the central term *ideology*. *Ideology* is defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as "ideal or abstract speculation," "unpractical or visionary theorizing or speculation." The *OED Supplement* adds, "A systematic scheme of ideas, usually relating to politics or society, or to the conduct of a class or group, and regarded as just actions, especially one that is held implicitly regardless of the course of events." *Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* identifies ideology as "idle theorizing," "an extremist sociopolitical program . . . with a factitious or hypothetical basis." Finally, D. D. Raphael, in his now standard *Problems in Political Philosophy*, defines it as "a prescriptive doctrine that is not supported by rational argument."

Ideology as generally understood, then, is not something to which

a decent, humane, and honest set of ideas ought to aspire. Orthodox Marxists, for example, see all ideologies as lies (conscious or not so conscious) of the ruling class, explaining all non-Marxist worldviews with reference to the class position of their holders. Pluralists and other orthodox capitalists, on the other hand, are much like Marxists in their anti-ideological ideology. To them, ideologies are appropriate only to some other age, one not so scientific and pragmatic as our own. Those in the "free West" are taken to be beyond ideology, something communists use to create "dupes," the capitalist equivalent of false consciousness. Neither side, therefore, defines ideology simply as a widely held and comprehensive point of view on political issues.

Against these views, one might suggest that no ideology is widely accepted for long unless it contains some truth. To think otherwise is to assume that all those to whom ideologies are directed are fools. However suspect the concept may seem to those with democratic proclivities, it surely has some usefulness.

In this book I use the word *ideology* in a more neutral way than it is usually used. I take an ideology as a set of political ideals, a worldview both value laden and comprehensive. Perhaps using the word *ideology* in this sense will serve as a reminder that any set of ideas, environmental ones included, can become a closed system, hostile to other or newer ideas, or even to the evidence presented by science. In fact a tendency to closure is probably inevitable, since one cannot come to a coherent political overview without shutting out, at least for a time, something of other intelligent versions of reality. But environmentalism, if it is to be worth the effort of further intellectual development, must remain more open than the ideologies that preceded it and more willing to appreciate the strengths of competing sets of ideas.

I hope this understanding of environmentalism will place front and center a consciousness of the forces of extermination built in the name of earlier ideologies. Seeking to establish environmentalism as an ideology may help to develop a "third way" able to defuse the ideological duality of the contemporary world. Plainly, any third way must reject the bureaucratic and exterminist character of both the contemporary superpowers, capitalist and socialist. It should

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also help to slow or halt the expansionism inherent in both capitalist and socialist systems, which tend to seek ever-larger economies well past the point where greater economic activity is either sustainable or desirable.

Environmentalism conceived as an ideology thus moves a very long way from its modest and apparently apolitical origins. Since 1980 many have come to see that, in effect if not in intent, environmentalism has been political all along. Opponents of environmentalism apparently saw its ideological potential before its advocates did, judging by the considerable political reaction provoked by the environmental efforts of the 1970s, especially in the United States. Even Lady Bird Johnson's effort to remove highway billboards was skillfully defeated in the long run. (There are probably as many billboards today in the United States as there were in 1970.) There has also developed, in state after state, province after province, a fierce and very expensive political opposition to efforts so seemingly bland as container-deposit legislation. Even litter has had strong political allies: millions upon millions of dollars were spent to defeat the California "bottle bill" in a public referendum, and as recently as the autumn of 1987 such an initiative was turned back in Washington, D.C.<sup>1</sup> Thus we can see that the environmental successes of the 1970s led to a clear, strong political reaction—a powerful ideological opposition to environmentalism that was scarcely visible prior to 1980. This opposition is concentrated in the neoconservatism that currently prevails in America, Britain, and Canada, an ideology that has shown itself to be consistently and vigorously anti-environmental.

The opposition to environmental protection from the political right thrusts environmentalists toward an alliance with the "progressive" forces of the moderate left. Many, though not all those who articulate environmentalism in North America and Western Europe place themselves in sympathy with the moderate political left. A neoconservative environmentalism is by no means impossible to conceive of, but the more important question is, What would an alliance of environmentalism and the moderate left look like? Neither has fared very well alone in recent years. That said, I want to make

it very clear from the outset that environmentalism has dimensions that place it altogether apart from the traditional left-right ideological spectrum.

The most obvious point of similarity between environmentalism and the moderate left is their shared willingness to intervene in a market economy on behalf of values that are not economic in the usual sense—that do not promote further economic expansion. The left, however, has traditionally sought to improve the distribution of ever-expanding economic benefits. Indeed, like the right it has argued that its policies result in greater economic growth. Environmentalism questions whether expansion beyond a reasonable level is a net benefit at all, regardless of how those benefits are distributed. Finally, the economic techniques of the left may carry a greater threat to environmental goals than those of the right. Governmental economic activity historically has forced economic growth where otherwise it might not have occurred,—market forces appear at times less effective than government as sources of economic expansion, however unwilling neoconservative economists might be to acknowledge this.

{ Environmentalism is an ideology distinctive first in its unwillingness to maximize economic advantages for its own adherents, or for any contemporary group. Environmentalists do of course on occasion defend their own and others' property against intrusions such as highways, airports, dumpsites, or pipelines, and this can be described as self-interested. But environmentalism requires accepting limits to certain forms of economic development, and those limits apply as much to environmentalists as to anyone against whom environmentalists might be politically engaged. Environmentalists too must accept the unavoidable inconveniences of public transport, the extra effort involved in recycling, and the tax shortfalls associated with deferring the use of scarce resources. Environmentalism has minimal appeal by way of personal economic gain; it may be the least economically self-interested of all ideologies.

Because it is not an ideology of self-interest, and because self-interest is deeply ingrained in our society, economy, and polity, environmentalism does not easily attract an intensely committed

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mass following. It appeals most to those with a reasonable degree of economic security (as distinct from much wealth), and only rarely does it appeal to the economically insecure.

The first principle of environmentalism is that the earth-as-a-whole, for all time, must be seen as a “commons.” Environmentalism grants both other species and future human generations consideration in economic and resource decisions. One might say that this perspective extends the generosity of the liberal grant of economic, political, and religious freedom. Environmentalism thus also stretches beyond Marx’s lucid case against liberalism (he noted that it was meaningless to declare both the poor and the rich equally free to sleep under bridges). Just as socialism forced the progressive liberal mind to expand its embrace, so too does environmentalism seek yet a further expansion.

Liberal and socialist intellectuals were speaking on behalf of others more often than for themselves. The early socialists felt that they themselves were poor so long as the majority of their fellow citizens were poor. For them the common good required that they gain relatively less than the peasants and workers in the coming transformations they so fervently advocated. Advocates of liberalism, too, sought not gain for themselves so much as the education and political development, the political and intellectual freedom, of those less well situated than they. The same breadth of mind and spirit motivates environmentalists, who seek principally to ensure that the gains in political and economic equity thus far achieved will be extended to future generations. Therefore, although there are profound differences between environmentalism and the ideologies that preceded it, the generosity of spirit that has propelled progressivism may be carried forward in environmentalism.

Liberalism, socialism, and environmentalism also share the intellectual trap of masochistic self-denial. Socialist revolution has never been principally a project of the working class: socialism was developed on behalf of, and in the name of, the proletariat. Likewise, environmentalism advocates for generations not yet born, seeking nothing less than the perpetuation and future comfort of all species. This is empathy at its logical terrestrial bounds. But, just as the “proletarians” of most developed nations have seen that the gains

of socialism are worth little if they come at the expense of those established earlier by liberalism, the future success of environmentalism depends on a reasonable level of security and comfort for the majority in society. Environmentalists must heed the wisdom of Edmund Burke and build on the past rather than seek to destroy or escape it.

Ideology itself—a complex of ideas seeking a widespread following—presumes the technical ability to communicate such ideas to large numbers of people: the notion only entered our vocabulary with the Industrial Revolution. Only in a society well beyond industrialism can we imagine that a large proportion of the population might apprehend something of the needs of the world-as-a-whole over the long-term future. And only in a truly post-industrial era can we imagine a majority with sufficient time to experience the seemingly impractical world of ideas and ideals.

It has never before been more important that vast numbers of people understand the logic of progressive ideas. Environmentalism might also be seen as a third wave of progressivism, developing in response to the atrophication of liberalism in the West and socialism in the East. The ideologies are armed to the teeth and face each other with only one obvious way out. A widespread acceptance of an environmental perspective seems even more necessary when conceived of as embracing antimilitarism. So conceived of, environmentalism, perhaps in defiance of all historical experience, is an ideology whose time has come.

This book cannot suggest with any precision how wide acceptance of the perspectives of environmentalism might ultimately lead to military disarmament. It might be best simply to invite faith in the assumption that the will to peace with nature and to peace among nations are linked together—and together might make a difference. Perhaps a future sustainable and healthy in terms of environment, ecology, and resources is one that would less likely succumb to nuclear armageddon. Finally—and here is something a bit more practical as a project—if any nation were to develop a nonoffensive, nontechnological defense, other nations might eventually follow that example. Some of the links between “exterminism” and “expansionism” are discussed more extensively here, but this is not the

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book's principal theme.<sup>2</sup> I simply do not have an answer to this most important of questions.

But international security is not unrelated to domestic economic and political stability and progress. The restoration of moderate progressivism and the achievement of political and economic stability are the consistent themes of this book. I hope that the environmentalist-progressive platform I develop can help to sustain, echoing Yeats, *a center that holds*.