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THE RE-GREENING OF NORTH AMERICA: An Overview of Green Politics and Philosophy
By Don Alexander

From North America to Europe
What is the "Green" movement? Green is philosophy, sensibility, and politics. It is an attempt at a new theoretical synthesis that goes beyond the traditional ideological bottlenecks represented by the Victorian philosophies of capitalism and communism. A number of principles have been advanced to sum up the Green perspective. The ones the German Greens have come up with are a good place to start: ecology, non-violence, social responsibility, and grass-roots democracy.

Ecology is the jumping-off point for Green philosophy. Increasingly, non-mainstream thinkers have realized that without a new orientation to nature, attempts at social change will reproduce traditional hierarchies. Both capitalism and communism are characterized by the attitude that human comfort and freedom can only be obtained at the expense of nature, that the salvation of humanity lies in technology and constantly expanding production. While creating cultures characterized by relative degrees of affluence, such systems have done little for the human soul, and have if anything left it further degraded and impoverished.

Green philosophy was developed in reaction to the "productivism" and "materialism" of modern technological society. This philosophy is grounded in the insights furnished by the "subversive science" of ecology. Instead of the hierarchical paradigm offered by capitalism and communism (with humanity at the summit), ecology has emphasized that all species have a co-equal role in maintaining the eco-system, that the web of nature is far too complex to be blithely manipulated by scientific technocrats for dubious ends. Green thinkers have recognized that any political project which seeks to abolish the domination of human by human will fail, if the sensibility of domination is maintained in our relations with nature. Ironically, it is within that most technologically advanced and rapacious nation, the United States, that the ecological counter-current finds some of its strongest roots, and where the modern environmental movement first came to prominence.

The second principle, non-violence, also owes much of its recent renaissance to the U.S., where Martin Luther King and anti-war activists have carried on the work of Mohandas K. Gandhi—who learned from Thoreau—who in turn had learned from the Vedantic tradition. The Greens in Europe have extended the principle of non-violence from the realm of human beings to the way humans treat nature—to other species, and to the biosphere as a whole.

The principle of social responsibility (or social justice) comes from the tradition of socialism and communism, but the Greens have reinterpreted this principle in ways that the solutions envisioned are relatively non-authoritarian and minimize violence. Moreover, there is the recognition that upgrading people's "standard of living" cannot be done at the expense of nature. Again, this kind of thinking (minus ecological consciousness) was a strong component of the early civil rights movement and SDS.
The fourth principle, grassroots democracy, also derives in part from the political culture of the United States, a counter-tradition to the highly spectacularized nature of professional politics. Thus, a concern for grassroots empowerment forms an important part of the legacy of the early New Left.

From Europe to North America

While not wishing to downplay the importance of indigenous European traditions (such as German Romanticism), I believe it can be said with some justification that North America, particularly the U.S., furnished many of the elements which later evolved into European Green politics. After a promising start, the New Left became enmeshed in its own contradictions and was overrun by authoritarian ideologies (Marxism-Leninism). At which point the ball shifted to Europe, and the Europeans--the Germans, in particular—took the unfinished elements created by the New Left and allowed them to germinate in the receptive soil of the post-60's ecology and citizens' movements, gradually shaping them into a more unified and coherent philosophy.

Now, perhaps, the point has been reached where the Europeans have run up against their limitations. While certainly not dead in the water, the European Green movement is stalemated. In the case of Germany, the "middle of the road" has predominated. The "visionary" fundus and the "pragmatic" Realos are kept in an unstable equilibrium by those who refuse to lean in either direction. While this uneasy alliance has lasted longer than I certainly thought possible, its endurance cannot conceal the profound and ultimately explosive contradictions which it is making. Entering into the parliamentary arena, whole boosting the popularity of the Greens, has catalyzed the "right-wingers", and has also had the effect of making the Greens' credibility dependent on their performance at the polls, which, after a lull, has actually improved—a result of Chernobyl and rampant pollution in the Rhine river.

The North American Scene

Meanwhile, in North America, the Green movement--in its bioregional, ecofeminist, deep ecology, social ecology, Green Party, and Committee of Correspondence manifestations--has been picking up steam. It is as if, in the ongoing game of transatlantic volleyball, the ball is once more in the North American court. The outstanding contradiction which the Europeans were not able to solve, and which confronts North American Greens, is the lack of a programme on the part of the "visionaries", and the lack of a vision on the part of the "pragmatists". Whether North American Greens will be able to meet this challenge--of deepening the vision, while at the same time creating a "transitional programme"--remains to be seen. To gauge the potential requires a brief survey of the North American scene.

As mentioned earlier, there are a number of methods one can use to classify the Greens: one can classify according to philosophy, according to sensibility, or according to politics. First, in terms of relevant guiding philosophies, four major ones have arisen in recent years: social ecology, deep ecology, bioregionalism, and ecofeminism. Social ecology, developed by anarchist philosopher Murray Bookchin, is an attempt to study how social developments have affected humanity's relationship with nature, and how nature and culture might be re-harmonized. For Bookchin the idea and practice of dominating nature derives from the idea and practice of dominating other humans. Deep ecology, developed by Arne Naess, George Sessions, Bill Devall, and others, attacks anthropocentrism—the notion that nature exists as a mere resource for human beings. Its understanding of the "social question" is explored via its conception of extended self-identification. This leads to "biocentrism"—the idea that all life-forms have equal claim to flourish; none can claim a right to dominate the others. Bioregionalism is the philosophy, redolent of the Native American worldview, that the human species functions best (to its own and Nature's benefit) when it identifies with a particular "place"—a bioregion (defined by geographical and biological features)—and strives to live within its contextual limits. Ecofeminism recognizes the interrelatedness between (the) human oppression (of women) and the oppression of nature. Ecofeminism, in addition, stresses that the disease of domination (in all its forms) derives from a particular psychic structure characteristic of patriarchal society.

A second way the Green movement can be divided is according to "sensibility". Some Greens, Rudolph Bahro being a singularly good example, are messianic in ambience. Their effectiveness is limited by their lack of a programme and by their "John the Baptist" attitude: "Repent! The end is near! Make way for the new ecological millennium!" Their vision is so apocalyptic that they fail, or do not know how, to move ordinary people to take the first halting steps towards a more ecological lifestyle, or to adopt more ecological patterns of thought.

Then there are the counter-culturalists who, by going back to the land, have developed a lot of the skills that make an alternative lifestyle and bioregional economic practice possible. Many are involved in the bioregional movement because, as back-to-the-landers, they have a strong sense of place.

The third group I call the "Green technologists", exemplified by Mark Satin and the New Options newsletter. They have links with New Age determinists (Teilhardians), who see the coming
"New Age" as preordained. Their methodology is eclectic. New Options takes from the left and the right as well as from elsewhere, and it tries to put together a "post-liberal" synthesis that will bring everyone together. The approach seems top-down, in contrast with radical Greens who seek to ground their philosophy and ideals in traditional wisdom and in a broad-based populist movement. The technologic Greens at times seem merely to want to give the old technocratic system a new coat of paint.

The third way of categorizing Greens is according to politics. At the one extreme, there are those with decided neo-Malthusian tendencies. They blame the ecological crisis on overpopulation. (This trend goes back to the work of Paul Ehrlich and Garrett Hardin). Some of these theorists hold the people of the Third World as responsible for current environmental problems as the so-called "developed" peoples, when, in fact, rapid population growth and the current disastrous state of agriculture in the Third World can be related to the policies of the industrial, the same nations which also consume the majority of the world's non-renewable "resources". In some cases, the suffering of the poor is seen as an inevitable working-out of a "law of nature". This point of view can at times verge on eco-fascism.

At the other end of the spectrum are "left-wing" Greens, like the "Fundis" in Germany who have assimilated elements of value in the socialist and anarchist traditions, and have a developed critique of society and of oppressions founded on race, class, gender, and political power. Murray Bookchin has been a particularly forceful exponent of this trend. His social ecology can be said to represent a new and valuable synthesis of anarchism, ecology, feminist and organic philosophy. While many ecophilosophers of the 70s and 80s see their recently found eco-wisdom as the new "leading edge", Murray Bookchin has been advancing these ideas since before the first Earth Day:

Our cities must be decentralized into communities or ecocommunities, exquisitely and artfully tailored to the carrying capacity of the ecosystems in which they are located. Our technologies must be re-adapted and advanced into eco-technologies, exquisitely and artfully adapted to make use of local energy sources and materials, with minimal or no pollution of the environment. We must recover a new sense of our needs--needs that foster a healthful life and express our individual proclivities, not 'needs' dictated by the mass media. We must restore the human scale in our environment and in our social relations...  

In the middle, between left and right, are the lukewarm Greens, who have taken German Green slogans and concepts and watered them down to make them more innocuous and less threatening. In the process this has converted their position into a sort of grey liberalism that is not radical or distinct enough to offer an alternative to the major parties. Furthermore, it is not environmentally focused enough to act as a strong pole inside the existing parties.

A Call to Radical Greens

As mentioned earlier, the Green movement is a product of an ongoing game of transatlantic volleyball, and the ball is in our court. As my brief (and admittedly opinionated) survey reveals, the Green movement in North America is highly heterogeneous, and it is impossible to generalize about what will happen. As Green principles and approaches filter into the mainstream (thus making for wider acceptance), the basis is formed for a popular Green movement. At the same time, as Green philosophy becomes more "vulgar" and diffuse, and as devotees of the old paradigm get on the bandwagon, what is to prevent Green politics and philosophy from becoming an enormous melting pot where the various colors merge into a uniform blend of grey? One way to resist this would be for radical Greens to continue to clarify the ecophilosophical, anarchist, feminist and Native American roots of our Green perspective, with an eye towards promoting theoretical cohesiveness.

But we should also begin to network and coalesce, not only in our cities and bio-regions, but also within a national framework. Not in order to field candidates for public office, but in order to take advantage of the quite different political and cultural traditions obtaining in our respective countries. In this way we can begin to build a distinct cultural, social and planetary ethos to replace the dominant technocratic one. The new ethos should build on the traditional strengths of Native peoples and populist movements of both Canada and the United States. Only in this way will we avoid having our movement hijacked by members of the "professional managerial class," who would give the movement an elitist edge.

As we deepen our vision, we must also work hard to develop a programme for how we get "there from here." To create such a programme will not be as difficult as it seems, but it will not be, nor should anyone expect, a detailed blueprint. It is not for lack of a blueprint that radical Greens fail to come up with alternatives to reformist environmentalism. Specific proposals remain dead letters without a "critical mass" of activists pulling in the same direction. Once we become clear on "what is to be done" (i.e. in what direction to go), the "programme" will formulate itself.
Notes
1. SDS is the acronym for Students for a Democratic Society, the main radical student organization in the U.S. in the 1960's.
2. "Fundis" is short for "Fundamentalists", the name of the radical faction, and "Realos" is short for "Realpolitickers", the faction which wants to merge with the Social Democrats.
3. "Committees of Correspondence" is the name borrowed from the American Revolution for the Green groups which are currently springing up in different parts of the U.S.
4. New Options is a newsletter founded and edited by Mark Satin. It is published monthly in Washington, D.C.
5. See, e.g., the interview with Dave Foreman in Simply Living, an attractive "greenish" publication from Manly, Australia. The interview was in Vol. 2, No. 12. The relevant remarks were reprinted and critiqued in the Canadian anarchist publication, Kick It Over, in their Winter '86/'87 issue. Dave Foreman is a spokesperson for Earth First!, a radical environmental organization dedicated to direct action to save wilderness areas and species.
6. From "The Power to Create, the Power to Destroy" in Toward an Ecological Society by Murray Bookchin, Black Rose Books, Montreal, 1980, pp. 42-43. This essay was written in 1969 and revised a decade later.

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