
New City Magazine, previously known as City Magazine, was a Canadian periodical dealing with housing and urban planning topics. The magazine ceased publication in Summer 1997.
IN REVIEWING

The Fading of the Greens, I am at a disadvantage in that I did not read Bramwell's earlier book, Ecology in the Twentieth Century, which may have been a superior work. This one, however, is flawed.

It covers an important topic - the reasons for the eclipse of Green parties in the West. However, it is filled with errors and vituperation, and lacks structure. It rambles from point to point without apparent plan and - apart from a crisp and insightful discussion of sustainable development - amounts to one cheap shot after another. Occasionally, her analysis yields tantalizing hypotheses or connections worthy of further exploration, but Bramwell seems incapable of sustained argument; she just barrels on to the next point.

What Bramwell sets out to do is certainly needed: an 'objective' (in the sense of relatively detached) appraisal of the Green and ecology movements, and their associated ideologies. But Bramwell's depreciatory tone overwhelms any sense of balance. She winds up sounding like a supporter of 'business as usual.' That's not to say she doesn't hit pay dirt occasionally, as she hones in on the puritanism and fundamentalism of some ecologists and hits at some of the gaping contradictions in Green ideology. But this a polemic masquerading as an academic study.

Bramwell's book is also undermined by the numerous errors it contains. Many names are misspelled - seven at last count - and dates are wrong (for instance, she claims that the 'sixties' began in 1968). But, worse, she gets basic concepts wrong - transposing the 'conservation' and 'preservation' movements in the U.S., and confusing Gesellschaft with Gemeinschaft. She also claims that the U.S. is a net energy exporter, which to my knowledge is not correct, and attributes federal ownership of much of the western United States to a strong anti-private property sentiment. Members of the U.S. Green Party will be surprised to learn that their party does not exist, and that the majority of American environmentalists are dyed-in-the-wool 'anti-capitalists'.

Unfortunately, her logic isn't much better than her facts. Here are some examples:

"not only have violent climate changes swept the northern hemisphere in the last two million years, but oxygen-breathing life itself only exists as a result of a great catastrophe that wiped out previous forms of life. All species today have benefited from this 'crime.' We are all oxygen imperialists" (pp. 90-91)

Bramwell makes much of the fact that since the Earth's resources are going to run out anyway, conserving them will only 'prolong the agony.' She also tells us that "With ecocentrism, instead of vowing one's libido to God, we vow the libido to nature[!]" (p. 185).

The book is organized into three parts. The first is an historical survey of the development of ecology movements from 1945 to 1970, followed by an analysis of the subsequent flowering and decline of green politics in the U.S., Germany, and Great Britain. The latter spans the period from 1970 to the early 1990s. The second section is a discussion of the reasons for the differences in strategies and tactics in various countries, and the third looks at the current state and likely future of Greens in Eastern and Western Europe. This framework notwithstanding, the book is full of digressions, such as her detailed critical review of Robert Reich's The Greening of America, which comes about a quarter of a century too late.

One of the main critiques that she makes of the Greens is that they maintain an inconsistent attitude towards science and rationality, and Enlightenment ideology in general. They disregard the fact that modern political ecology has its roots in a nineteenth century scientific revolution, and that "an urban and scientifically literate society [is] necessary for ecologism to flourish" (p. 25). She speaks of the interest of some late 19th and early 20th century scientists in entropy and vitalism, their embrace of non-anthropocentric biology or ecology, and the similarity between their values and beliefs and those of today's Greens.

Some of these include a fondness for matriarchy, a critical attitude towards capitalism, and a high regard for traditional societies. She asserts that the ecologists of a century ago also saw humans as an integral part of nature. However, ecosystem theory, as it was to develop in the early 20th century, actually made very little reference to human beings.
Continuing with her critique, Bramwell accuses Greens of having a love/hate relationship with the state. She sees a fundamental ambivalence around the issue of centralism vs. decentralism, and describes how the European Community has proven a thorny issue in this regard. Ideologically, Greens remain opposed to free trade and loss of sovereignty and self-reliance. Pragmatically, however, they have seen possibilities for stronger environmental regulations through the EC, and a greater influence for themselves. In essence, Bramwell says that Greens have been caught flat-footed by the increasing shift in power from the national realm to the regional and global realms.

She is also critical of the anti-individualism and pro-communitarianism of the ecology movement, which she attributes to nostalgia for student dormitory life. But her coup de grâce is her claim that the German Greens are not really ‘green’ at all (ironic, given her anti-Green stance). In her view, the German Greens grafted a few environmentalist planks onto a radical-liberal platform of ‘niceness,’ without considering some of the contradictions inherent in such a position. In positing a fundamental contradiction between what she calls the “liberal urban left” and the “perspective of radical ecologist,” she ignores the long and fruitful history of social ecology, which has combined these elements for over 30 years.

Bramwell continually asserts that the Greens believed (prior to the end of the Cold War) that the capitalist and communist worlds were bound to converge, but she never explains what they meant by this. Further, she thinks that Greens had some vested interest in overlooking environmental problems in the ‘socialist’ world. On the contrary, I think that what was really meant by ‘convergence’ was that capitalism and socialism were seen as being related forms of industrialism, with many common points concerning the centrality of production and the rightness of humans dominating nature. But Bramwell prefers to hold a Manichaean world-view in which one must be either pro-capitalist or pro-communist.

Bramwell herself maintains a staunchly pro-Western stance that can only be maintained at the cost of white-washing the facts. In her chapter entitled “Deep Ecology and Civil Disobedience,” Bramwell implies that deep ecologists would like to do away with predation altogether, and are in favor of authoritarian command economies. For her, deep ecology’s attempts to commute directly with nature become a search for “super-and supra-human status” (p. 160).

As with Murray Bookchin’s attack, her assessment of deep ecology’s ‘anti-humanism’ is too generic and unnuanced. Her discussion of eco-centric ethics fails to acknowledge that there might be grounds, other than anti-humanism, for wanting to respect the destinies of other parts of nature.

She attributes the bioregional call for minimizing trade and stabilizing immigration to ideological perversity. She doesn’t grasp the underlying point that bioregionalists are concerned with assisting regions to ‘internalize’ their ecological footprints, and thereby develop local sensitivity to ecological feedback. This is because bioregionalists believe that the global crisis is a manifestation of an unbalanced human ecology at a regional scale. As Wackernagel and Rees point out, in *Our Ecological Footprint*, there is nothing intrinsically wrong with trade if it involves the export of items which represent a genuine ecological surplus.

So, what is Bramwell’s alternative to the woolly, knee-jerk thinking characteristic of the Greens? She seems to hold a favourable attitude towards sustainable development. Her discussion of it, in contrast with the rest of the book, is non-polemical and well-informed. Here she explores some of the ways governments are trying to operationalize the concept, but it is not clear how the chapter fits into the book as a whole.

In line with her favourable attitude towards the status quo, she believes that the ‘useable’ Green ideas have already been absorbed by people who can ‘do something’ with them, while the chant (which she spends her book criticizing) has been left to wither on the margins.

Bramwell is a firm believer that a piece-meal approach to environmental management will solve the global problems facing us. Her confidence is quaint. As an example, she cites how governments have
been “galvanized... into action” by the greenhouse effect (p. 167). In fact, the Earth Summit Climate Convention only commits the industrialized countries to develop emission inventories and limits, with no specific report dates or targets. Money was promised for developing countries to spend on energy efficiency and pollution control, but no amounts or sources have ever been specified.

Bramwell’s basic thesis, and the most interesting part of the book, is the claim that “Both the ideological structure and the accidental dependence on the example of German Greens were to prove disasters for the national Green parties when, towards the end of the 1980s, the environmental movement abruptly moved out of the shadows into the forefront of political consciousness throughout the West” (p. 123). She also claims that “Green politics and institutionalized party politics are anathema, incompatible in process, in means and in ends” (p. 135). These are intriguing ideas, and provide clues as to why the Greens’ surge in influence and electoral success proved so short-lived.

Bramwell has aptly identified the near-religious messianism of parts of the ecology movement; its ambivalence towards science and the state, and its tendency to paper over major doctrinal sticking-points. However, it will take a more skilled and objective author than Bramwell to actually ‘do something’ with these insights.

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