

State, market and democracy in Green politics

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Greens tend to fight shy of grand, abstract terms, especially in the political sphere. It is probably better that way but it can lead to misunderstandings. It can obscure the extent to which there is a distinctly Green political philosophy; it is also exploited by many journalists, who still feign surprise when Greens talk of anything other than the environment. This reticence is probably born of the primacy in Green minds of what is loosely called 'the planet', without whose good health no one will survive. Alone among political movements, the Greens arose not out of social preferences but scientific knowledge of the physical state of the world. This can conceal a considerable unity of purpose and cohesion in the political analysis it gives rise to, which is also testament to important, but undervalued, intellectual currents beneath it.

This paper looks at those currents and where they place Green ideas in the universe of political thought, particularly in relation to older ideas about socialism. A couple of sections will briefly describe the ideas themselves, which will then be examined in the light of three touchstones of political thinking:

The State v. Market debate

Attitudes to the commons

The Role of money

Green political thought

After forty years of development Green political thought has a distinctive character, although, like any such tradition, it contains various threads. Central to it is an understanding that environmental degradation did not 'just happen' but was occasioned by the demands of the economic system. It is ultimately attributable to those in control of the economy, who put economic production above all other goals. Generally, it is connected with the competitive, profit-seeking economy, and is currently magnified in scale and intensity by the size and power of modern corporations, which are pressed to achieve short-term results regardless of non-economic consequences. This explanation immediately implies some scepticism towards capitalism.

There are strong echoes in Green thinking of socialist themes but with a twist in favour of small, decentralized and human-scale forms, in which production, distribution and political decisions are made as local as possible. Here the heritage of William Morris is apparent. There is a resistance to class-based ideas of politics, and among some Greens to the very concepts of Left and Right. Most Greens also share what some would see as traditionally conservative values of community, even if with a radical edge. Much of this is related to the libertarian socialism which all but disappeared in the era of the Labour movement and Communism but returned with the New Left in the 1960s. There is also a strong anarchist influence on Green activism, in a whole strand which is wary of collectivism, the state and Parliamentary politics as well as the market and its attendant inequalities.

An important concept in Green thinking is the 'commons', which is not frequently found in most of organized socialist politics. But you could say that it is the most socialist concept of all: that land, and all things under it, should belong to everyone, or perhaps to no one, and their use should be decided by a community itself, without anyone holding preponderant power. In England, socialist ideas first developed in reaction to the enclosure of the commons, which removed people from direct responsibility for the land to become agricultural employees, and later to leave the land entirely to work in industry. Greens put much more emphasis than most socialists on issues related to the land, including agriculture, food and, indirectly, international trade.

Seeing the depth of the environmental crisis, Greens consider that they take the future, and future people, most seriously. It is hard to call yourself a believer in society or equality unless you treat your descendants as equals. The fetish among all other parties for economic growth, which is destroying the world on which we rely, tramples on our descendants. Likewise, Greens take a broad view of humanity and understand that it is every bit as important to achieve equality globally as within the nation state.

In a movement which arose in the last third of the 20th century, Green political thinking was also influenced by an element that was born during the Second World War. When there was no parliamentary opposition, a new party was created and won a few by-elections. Called Common Wealth, it stood for a kind of decentralized socialism for the community, without the Labour Party's trade union basis. In Labour's landslide in 1945 this party lost its MPs and soon its *raison d'être*, but it continued as a pressure group for some time. Common Wealth itself drew on older traditions, including those of the Levellers and the Putney Debates after the English Civil War. Its ideas were revived in the 'alternative society' of the late 1960s, from which ground the Ecology or Green Party arose. Some of the party's founders were directly linked to Common Wealth, or inspired by it.

In general, Greens are little obsessed with notions of socialism and conservatism as traditionally understood, but value equality, inclusiveness, environmental limits and biological diversity in themselves. There is a kind of pragmatism which allows, for example, for statist solutions like the denationalization of the railways alongside support for small private businesses. This also accepts that difficult policies like combatting climate change have to be led by the state: civil society will not achieve it on its own, while the market-based measures of carbon trading and carbon offsets have proved inadequate. G.D.H. Cole, the early 20th-century socialist thinker, also saw roles for both the state and private ownership, limited by an economic democracy that would span both industry and the wider society. Cole often used the term 'commonwealth' rather than 'state' or 'society', but this commonwealth should not be perceived a single entity. Rather, it entailed a plurality of commonwealths, which were means to various ends and not ends in themselves⁹.

Greens, socialists and revolutionaries

In their political praxis, Greens are strikingly different from much of the Labour and socialist movements. Because of the defects of capitalism, many Greens believe in some form of social revolution. However - perhaps because the movement arose when universal suffrage and guarantees of human rights already existed, rather than in the wake of the 1789 or 1848 revolutions - they are inclined to operate largely through existing institutions. They may wish to reform them, often profoundly, but not to overthrow them.

Greens try to win by persuasion and prefer consensus to decisions by majority. On the whole they do not make demands but proposals, and try to resolve disputes at all levels through debate and discussion and, where necessary, mediation. They join in specific struggles and are ready passively to face conflict with forces of the state - but only tactically; violent confrontation is never a strategic option. They encourage the formation of citizen groups which will act autonomously, not as instructed by Green politicians or parties. This is part of an active, decentralized democracy, essential to the Green view of society. Greens reject any idea that the end can justify the means, and do not want political changes to create winners and losers. Even those who they might eventually defeat politically will still form part of society, and must be accommodated in it. Of course, that is also true of most modern socialists; but the political background is nevertheless different. Greens consider that behaviour in politics matters in itself: how can anyone credibly call for a better world if they do not live up to its standards themselves?

The ideas of a powerful thinker like Marx are bound to percolate through to many Greens, whether they are aware of it or not. But most people in the Green tradition do not share several basic tenets of Marxism, such as the labour theory of value, belief in class struggle or the vision of an ideal society as the main end in itself. Social class is not a strong concept in Green thinking. There is no notion of one class being superior or inferior to any other, even if sympathies tend to lie with the weakest and poorest, such as smallholders or trade unionists in struggle. If there is a general enemy, it is not a class but the economic phenomenon of corporate power. Nevertheless, Greens agree with Marxists that the inherent inequality and alienation in modern capitalist societies needs to be overcome, even if the theories underlying these issues are not much discussed in those terms within the party.

State v. Market v. Democracy

In economic policy there is a conventional polarity of State v. Market, mirrored politically in the opposition of labour and capital, the Labour and Conservative Parties. This ignores the fact that in nearly all schools of economic thought, there are actually three 'factors of production' - the elements from which all commodities that are sold on the market are produced. These are labour, capital and land¹⁰. In the 19th century the land - or at least landowners and farmers - were represented politically in the Conservative Party. Right until Mrs Thatcher's time the 'landed interest' was near the heart of the Conservative coalition, but under neo-liberalism it was swept aside by the interests of urban financial capital. Even regardless of the environmental crisis, it is hardly surprising that a new, radical force should have arisen in defence of the land, the planet we live on.

A similar opposition has sometimes been posited between the market and democracy, for example in a masterly study of Russia's disastrous reforms of the early 1990s. Here, Western institutions intervened on the side of the nascent 'market' against a similarly nascent but very weak democracy (and even applauded when the army under Yeltsin burnt out the elected Russian Parliament in October 1993):

The choice of the ruling elite and its Western allies for an abrupt marketization, privatization, and deregulation led very rapidly – and with full awareness on the part of key Russian participants like Yeltsin and Gaidar - to the abandonment of the democratic road to reform.¹¹

Here, as so often, the forces of capital - as represented in this case by US politicians and the International Monetary Fund - relied on the Russian state to ensure that an order friendly to them was created, for fear of what emerging Russian democratic institutions might otherwise

provide. Within a decade, this led to the genesis of the Putin state, which is based on an alliance between corporate oligarchs and the secret service (FSB), with no more than a transparent façade of democracy in a novel form of state capitalism.

In fact neither of those dichotomies is sufficient. Between them, they indicate that there are actually three alternative principles of economic organization, not the state and the market alone:

Democracy: seen in the decentralized rule of the commons, mutual societies, clubs and co-operatives, and public services under democratic rule;

Authority: the top-down administrative model typical of the state and the corporation;

Exchange: where power is mediated by money and markets.

It is the democratic mode that has generally been overlooked as an economic principle. But the picture is complicated and nuanced, since most economic phenomena stand somewhere between the three vertices of this triangle. Thus, the modern state combines both (1) and (2): it is organized as a vertical hierarchy but is subject to democratic forces, which are real and substantial even if very incomplete. Meanwhile, a 'free' market system, which comes under (3), tends gradually towards the centralized, authoritarian model of (2) as control over capital becomes concentrated in the hands of fewer and ever bigger companies, and more and more assets are owned by a vanishingly small number of hyper-rich individuals.

State v. Commons

Most Greens would push for the Democracy principle, and some set it up in the form of the commons as a universal ideal in itself. Greens might not reject private ownership as such, but they do resist its excessive power. There is nothing new or particularly radical about that: even Tories and businessmen have accepted the idea to some extent in the past. Earlier in the 20th century there was a widespread trend away from the principle of Exchange towards the Democratic one, regardless of which party was in power. For example, during a remarkably similar episode to the crisis of mid-2015, dairy farmers in the 1920s and early 1930s were exploited by large industrial dairies, which forced milk purchasing prices down. The National Government, with a Conservative Minister of Agriculture, resolved this dispute by abandoning the Exchange principle in this area altogether. He replaced commercial supply chains with the Milk Marketing Board, a statutory body run by a board composed of all elements of the sector, but

mostly farmers. It worked well for 60 years and even Mrs Thatcher did not touch it. The present crisis has slowly developed since the MMB was finally abolished, and free wholesale exchange returned, under the Major government in 1994.

In the same era, some important organizations such as the Standard Life insurance company converted voluntarily from corporate to mutual ownership in the 1920s. Standard Life for long thereafter reigned supreme as the life insurance firm with the best financial results - as did the mutuals in that sector in general, as well as large clubs in other sectors which were eventually turned over to private ownership in the 1990s, such as the Automobile Association, the Royal Automobile Club and numerous building societies.

The pioneering socialists of the 19th century wanted the state, as well as the market, to wither away, and power to pass to the people by means of common and co-operative ownership and management. That was equally true in the very different visions of Karl Marx and William Morris. However, in the wider Labour movement, socialism got caught up, naturally enough, with workers' demands for more pay, while in 20th-century practice what is called socialism was always based on the state: it was used as a proxy or agent for the people, perhaps, but it was not the people themselves. In the Attlee government's nationalizations after 1945, many in the Labour Party wanted the mines, railways and so on to be managed by their own workers, arguing that that would be the socialist way. However, Herbert Morrison, a former leader of the London County Council, prevailed with his top-down, managerial model, run by the government.

In 21st-century politics, it is the Greens who work hardest for local self-organization - and are also, in my experience, much keener on realizing the co-operative principle than Labour people have been of late, although that could change with the shift in Labour's membership under Jeremy Corbyn. But in standing up for the 'land', on which all life depends, and not just the workers, it could be argued that Greens are more socialist than Labour's tradition. Although the commons were integral to feudalism, they have always been under attack under capitalism, ever since the first enclosures in 15th-century England. That attack has gone on apace in recent years, extending to the air, rivers in some countries and tropical forests. In the face of this attack, it is the economic principle of Democracy and the Commons which needs to be asserted right now.

Money: do we need it?

Since the banking crash, which was caused by excessive debts, the debate among self-consciously radical people has revolved strongly

around the nature and origin of money, rather than how to reduce the role of money and even avoid reliance on it altogether. However, the more areas of society become de-monetised like the National Health Service, the less need there is for devices like the citizen's income or quantitative easing, and the easier it will be to get away from wage slavery (a term, incidentally, which Greens sometimes use but is rarely heard in Labour circles).

In the past, it was an important socialist goal to do away with money altogether, and with it the 'commodification' of everything. It would not be needed when both the state and the market had withered away. Under their 'War Communism' experiment in 1918-19, the Bolsheviks tried to do this. Later, the USSR consciously reduced the role of money when it created its new institutions in the 1930s. Money's role under central planning was limited and most private markets were heavily repressed as 'speculation'. But in the true Russian political tradition, the Bolsheviks repressed the coordinating role of money and markets politically, rather than stimulating common ownership and democracy as a replacement for it. A mirror image of that then appeared in Yeltsin's time after 1991.

Some of the most toxic political controversies still revolve around where money should be used and where not - for example, over the NHS and student fees. The Tories want money and markets there but most people value universal access, free at the point of use, because of the simplicity and fairness of it. And that is socialism in action: from each according to their ability, to each according to their needs. Intuitively, people in Britain (and probably throughout the world) support it, at least in certain areas of life. But many would be horrified to think of it as socialist, since it has not recently been defended as such in British politics. As public support for neo-liberalism and its money-based doctrines wanes, the case for reducing the role of money in general should be made.

Greens, Socialism and idealistic thinking

It is clear that Green political thinking draws strongly on socialist ideas, and it could be said that in especially prizing democracy but being chary of the centralizing state, Greens hold truer to it than the major 'socialist' traditions which developed during the 20th century. Greens recognize the necessity of state action to ensure fair dealings and counter the 'tragedy of the commons' and 'free rider' problems. Many anarchists have Green leanings, but the formal Green movement - or Green parties - do not espouse anarchism. However, they do remain somewhat guarded about the central state and insist on the dispersal of political power and the decentralization, or localization, of the

economy. Of course, that may in part be a consequence of the limited amount of state power that Greens have actually enjoyed so far.

Going back to the three principles of economic organization, most Greens certainly prefer the first of them, Democracy. That is also in the spirit of socialism, if we accept that philosophy as originally an attempt to extend to the economy the democratization of politics which the English, American and French Revolutions initiated. Basic decisions on economic organization must be subject to free democratic choice, including the possibility of modifying those decisions if the circumstances, or the political majority, changes.

Nevertheless, all three principles have their merits and demerits, and each of them has a role to play in the economy and society. Trouble comes when one of them is pushed as an ideal, to be pursued to the exclusion of the others. During the course of the last century, assiduous programmes of this sort have been pursued for two of them: for (2) - state planning - under Bolshevism, and more recently (3) - market exchange - under neo-liberalism. The present situation is particularly dangerous as neoliberal states are trying to entrench the domination of the Exchange principle and corporate power through international treaties such as the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP), Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), Trade in Services Agreement (TiSA), and others.

Many Greens reject idealistic thinking of this sort. Rupert Read admits to being impressed by conservatism's 'scepticism as to "theory", its emphasis on what can actually be done without relying on fantasies of perfect institutions'. Some Greens, however, put forward the commons or co-operation as an alternative ideal; it would sit on the Democracy vertex of this triangle. A related, but not identical, ideal vision is that of the simple 'good life' in traditional communities of a sort which, it is said, have been destroyed by industry, the market and urbanism. The most radical advocates of localization include some people who have witnessed the damage done by the market economy to other people and societies around the world.

However, it is unwise to draw general conclusions from any particular experience. For example, even in Tsarist Russia there was a strong tradition of local communal rule, the village 'mir'. However, it was allied to a brutal tradition of autonomous local justice called 'samosud', as illustrated in this short historical passage¹²:

Because of the number of misfortunes attributed to her, the peasants of Vrachev decided to burn Grushka [known as a sorceress and fortune-teller]. They took their decision during a meeting of the village assembly, which had gathered in Vrachev to divide the property of four peasant brothers.

This illustrates the contradictions that can exist in idealistic thinking of this sort. In some places, autonomous local communities have produced successful, harmonious societies. But in others they have applied different norms with various forms of brutality, which would make most Greens recoil. This example from Russian history should give pause to the advocacy of community and localization as universal ideals. So for my part, I do not support the extension of democracy, or the commons or co-operative ownership, to everything, although they should certainly be greatly extended from their present diminished state. My experience of the USSR in the 1970s and 1980s convinced me of the need to introduce market mechanisms for some purposes there, and I am sure they are required in all modern societies, for the broad reasons that are given by full-blooded advocates of the market system. Likewise, Authority and hierarchies are essential in many organizations too. Democracy and decentralization need to be the general direction of travel; however, not to the complete abandonment of Authority and Exchange.

End Notes

¹ Many thanks to Tom Lines for his informed and thoughtful comments on an early draft.

² Corbyn's £3 supporters tend to be much younger than Labour's new members many of whom are returning after a long absence.

³ Figures based on [Audit Bureau of Circulations](#)

⁴ A case in point is perhaps Eliot Higgins' [Bellingcat](#) news site which has published details about recent military campaigns in Syria and the Ukraine which consistently and persistently fail to get coverage among the mainstream news media.

⁵ I am indebted to my colleagues at Green House, in particular Victor Anderson and John Blewitt, for their assistance with my discussion of socialism

⁶ This is based on a presentation given at the Schumacher Institute Challenge Day entitled 'The Sustainability Movement: Re-think, re-boot, re-new' in Bristol 16th on June 2012.

⁷ I am grateful to Green House colleagues for comments on my original draft.

⁸ I am grateful to other members of Green House for their ideas and encouragement for this paper, and Victor Anderson, John Blewitt and Rupert Read in particular. Any defects in it are entirely the author's responsibility.

⁹ I am indebted to John Blewitt for the information about G.D.H.Cole, and to Rupert Read, Jonathan Essex and Victor Anderson for other points in the last three paragraphs.

¹⁰ I set aside here the debates about whether any of the three should be excluded, or whether a fourth, fifth or even sixth factor should be added, such as enterprise, technology and social capital.

¹¹ Reddaway, P. and Glinski, D. (2001) *The Tragedy of Russia's Reforms: Market Bolshevism against democracy*. Washington: U.S. Institute of Peace Press, p. 56.

¹² Frank, S.F. (1987) Popular Justice, Community and Culture among the Russian Peasantry, 1870-1900. *The Russian Review*, vol. 46, pp.239-65. See also Merridale, C. (2000) *Night of Stone: Death and Memory in Russia*. London: Granta, pp. 43 and 55.

