

Ecocentrism: Left or right?

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About the author

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It might be helpful, for those who want to think through ecocentrism politically, to be able to situate it in relation to those vague but pervasive terms, ‘left wing’ and ‘right wing’. They originated in French revolutionary politics, when monarchists sat on one side of the National Assembly while supporters of the Revolution placed themselves on the other. Since then, in a broad and relative way, ‘left’ has come to mean progressive, liberal or radical, while ‘right’ denotes reactionary or conservative. (In Ambrose Bierce’s sardonic summary, a Conservative is enamoured of existing evils, while a Liberal wishes to replace them with new ones.)

There is truth in both definitions, but also huge problems. Marxism–Leninism is supposed to be on the left, but how could its development under Stalin, Mao or Pol Pot possibly be considered progressive? Neo-liberalism has practically come to occupy the right but it is certainly radical, even revolutionary. ‘Move fast and break things’ is not exactly a conservative position, and the touchstone conservatism of Ruskin, Burke and Oakeshott has disappeared from political parties that today go by that name.

Nevertheless, these terms continue to be used and I’m afraid they are not going to vanish. So the best remedy is probably to try to use them carefully. In which case, we may ask: where does ecocentrism go? I would say that it is irreducibly ambiguous. For

example, in locating final value in the Earth and its creatures, not only human beings, it is progressive – indeed, progressive beyond the parochially human dreams of the left. But in being passionate about protecting life and what supports it – places, ecosystems and evolutionary integrity – it is deeply conservative, and rightly so.

In the most important respect of all, however, ecocentrism is neither left nor right. As commonly understood, both are completely anthropocentric: concerned finally, or even only, with human welfare. The only value they recognize in the non-human world is instrumental, restricted to what our narrow, short-term and short-sighted views of our own needs dictate. In stark contrast, the very point of ecocentrism is to go beyond that limit – a limit that is often taken to justify human supremacy, lethal speciesism, and an imperialistic appropriation of non-human nature. Does that make it revolutionary (like the new right) or the ultimate socialism (a new version of the old left)? Both, perhaps. But it’s not really our job to perfectly clarify the political map when the terrain is burning. ■

Further reading

Crist E (2017) The affliction of human supremacy. *The Ecological Citizen* 1: 61–4.

Curry P (2007) Green ethics and the democratic left. *Soundings* 35: 66–75. Available at <https://is.gd/l7X5Zl> (accessed August 2017).

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