

ENVIRONMENTALISM

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Environmentalism is the politics of concern for the state of the environment. More specifically, it is the belief in a current threat, which, if left unameliorated, will have more or less devastating consequences for both the present and future. Although currently deemed a recent American invention, it has roots stretching back to the emergence of European capitalism and colonialism. Its middle class pedigree and reliance on the state remain features of modern environmentalism in the developed world and in its export variants to the developing world where indigenous forms are either not recognised as such or actively suppressed. The term, however, is used to encompass such a wide range of ideologies and politics as to render it all but conceptually meaningless and analytically useless. One way out of the impasse is to specify the participant interest groups and the social context of any environmental politics, that is to say, to treat environmentalism like any other politics and to assess its claims and their merits accordingly.

1. Introduction

The term environmentalism, which refers to the politics of concern about the state of the environment, is usually animated by a belief that the environment is somehow threatened/in decline and thus in need of urgent protection, failing which some or other catastrophe will ensue with dire consequences for both current, but more especially, future generations. Indeed, the sense of present crisis and/or future catastrophe can be said to be a common feature of environmentalist discourse in all its forms. The perceived threat is almost always either human or the result of human action, and its removal therefore invariably requires the reform of an aspect or all of humanity's attitudes and approaches towards the non-human world. The latter are more or less explicitly deemed to derive from notions of development, whether capitalist or socialist, which have reduced the non-human world to a resource inventory for exploitation for the satisfaction of human needs. Environmentalism thus has the dual aim of changing practices and beliefs in the present to ensure survival in the future.

Environmentalism in this sense is a very broad church and this breadth is the concept's greatest weakness, allowing the assimilation of an infinite variety of unrelated and often

contradictory issues and struggles, both past and present, under a single banner. The capitalised, *universalist* use of the term is grounded in the assertion of a common humanity, interests and future for the world's population, which it sees as engaged in a single struggle against the forces of development, variously defined and embodied, which began in earnest in the last third of the twentieth century, but has antecedents stretching back to the primary resistance of the European peasantry to capitalism and native peoples to colonialism. This resistance is portrayed as founded on a philosophy of harmonious co-existence with nature fundamentally opposed to the new development ethos powering capitalism and its associated colonialism. To maintain this fiction all evidence of pre-capitalist and pre-colonial disharmonies and over-exploitation of natural resources are simply elided. Profoundly ahistorical, the universalist usage is thus also always deeply ideological while earnestly insisting on its apolitical or even anti-political character.

A more narrowly historical use of the term, with a small “e” plural, sees it as the changing ideologies of specific groups in society whose particular class, ethnic, racial, religious and other beliefs and ideologies shape the form and content of “environmentalism” in any given context. Environmentalism in this reading is not one, but many systems of belief about the proper relationship between humans and the non-human world without any common thread or purpose. It suggests that concern about the human impact on the non-human world is a luxury chiefly afforded the wealthy whose urban industrial standard of living and leisure time produce both alienation and a particular set of romantic attitudes towards the rural and wilderness which are seen as shrinking reservoirs of the sublime in urgent need of preservation. This elite environmentalism marshals and deploys the state to protect its imaginary wildernesses by depopulating them and criminalising all human use of their resources. Public (ie state) ownership puts such areas beyond both the reach of the market, and hence development, and also the underclass, which lacks the means, leisure time and romantic sensibility to utilise them as places of contemplation. Conversely, the efforts of the underclass to resist development and the creation of “wilderness” are not regarded as “environmentalism”, but rather as sedition and is treated as such by the elite. The environmentalism of the dispossessed is thus suppressed and feeds instead into broader popular ideologies of nationalism, ethnicity, socialism, and the like seeking the reform or replacement of the prevailing order.

The massively increased pace in human alteration of the non-human world over the course of the twentieth century (see *ROLE OF HUMAN SOCIETIES IN THE HISTORY OF THE BIOSPHERE*), the victory of Third World nationalism over colonialism, and the sustained challenge posed by socialism during the Cold War combined to gradually shift the discourse of elite environmentalism towards a more inclusive popular format and to grudgingly legitimate underclass environmentalism for the first time. The United Nations Organisation, in particular, played a central role in the co-ordination of the various national environmentalisms into a global environmentalism, which remains dominated by the elite tradition. As a convocation of nation states the new global environmentalism continues to embody and reflect the inequalities of historical development and the preferences and prejudices of the elite from the developed world in its endless rounds of meetings, conferences and summits.

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