

Introducing Green Theory in International Relations

Written by Hugh Dyer

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HUGH DYER, JAN 7 2018

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In the 1960s there was public recognition of the global environmental crisis arising from the ‘tragedy of the commons’, which is the idea that as self-interested individuals, humans will overuse shared resources such as land, fresh water and fish. In the 1970s the first United Nations conference on the subject was held and by the 1980s green political parties and public policies had emerged. This coincided with a demand for a green theory to help explain and understand these political issues. By the 1990s, International Relations had come to recognise the natural environment as an increasingly significant source of questions for the discipline, requiring theoretical as well as practical attention – especially in the wake of mounting evidence that human actions were significantly changing our global climate and presenting security problems as well as ecological ones.

The basics of green theory

Ecological thought addresses the interests of nature itself rather than only the interests of humanity in nature. Green theory captures this orientation in political terms of value and agency (Goodin 1992) – what is to be valued, by whom and how to get it. Green theory belongs to the critical theory tradition, in the sense that environmental issues evoke questions about relations between and among ourselves and others in the context of community and collective decision-making. In turn this has always raised the question of where the boundaries of political community are. For environmental problems, which transcend boundaries, these questions take the form of asking at what level of political community we should seek a solution. For green theorists, the answers are found in alternative ideas about political association based on our ecological relationships.

The introduction of environmental issues into IR has had some influence, but their theoretical significance and practical policy implications may be viewed either as compatible or as irreconcilable with traditional assumptions and current practices. If viewed traditionally, then environmental issues can simply be added to the list of issues dealt with by existing means, for existing ends. If viewed alternatively, then these issues may lead to theoretical and practical transformation. Because theory and practice are linked, when environmental issues challenge existing practice they also raise new questions that IR theory must contend with. The obvious practical challenges of environmental change have not yet transformed IR theory – or even practice very much. The continued prevalence of competitive state relations is not conducive to environmental cooperation or encouraging to green thought. However, there has been theoretical development and some practical progress and a wide-ranging literature has emerged viewing a variety of environmental issues from different theoretical perspectives. If this doesn’t amount to a single clear vision, it certainly represents a longer-term view about humankind’s common future.

Typically, environmental issues are buried in IR texts under other headings and with little acknowledgement of their unique theoretical significance. Environmentalism-themed scholarship is generally accepting of the existing framework of political, social and economic structures of world politics. While there are of course established forms of critical thought, these address relations within and between human communities, rather than human relations with the non-human environment. For example, liberalism emphasises individual rights of choice and consumption but is not fundamentally concerned with the environmental consequences of that consumption. Consequently, most forms

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of environmentalism seek to establish theoretical positions and practical solutions through existing structures, or in line with existing critiques of such structures. If less critical in orientation, then these views are likely to be compatible with a liberal position in IR (viewing international cooperation as being of general benefit to states). If more critical in orientation, then environmentalism may align itself to a critique of the capitalist world system (maldistribution of benefits to people), if not challenging its commitment to production and consumption per se. An environmentalist perspective, while identifying environmental change as an issue, attempts to find room for the environment among our existing categories of other concerns, rather than considering it to be definitional or transformational.

Those frustrated by the lack of recognition of the environmental challenge in international relations turned to the interdisciplinary science of ecology. Political ecology has allowed both an ecological perspective to inform political thought and a political understanding of our environmental circumstances. In particular, our circumstances have long been determined by a particular developmental path that depends on the over-consumption of natural resources. Specifically, our political-economic practices of production, distribution and consumption are intended to meet our immediate human needs and desires. However, these practices are reflected in a growth-dependent global market economy that is not designed to achieve environmental sustainability or recognise ecological limits. This economy has provided material development of a kind, but with such uneven benefits and widespread collateral damage – including to the environment – that it has not provided human development in an ecological context. From an ecological perspective, there has been a general criticism of development and even apparently progressive sustainable development practices. The well-known model of the ‘tragedy of the commons’ (Hardin 1968), in which our short-term, individual, rational choices destroy our environmental resources, has thus been applied to the planet as a whole. It is tragic because we can see it coming but seem unable or unwilling to do anything about it. That inability is more than a practical problem; it is a profound theoretical challenge. Hardin pointed out that such issues cannot be solved by technical means, but require a change in human values.

Moving beyond environmentalism and political ecology, green theory more radically challenges existing political, social and economic structures. In particular, it challenges mainstream liberal political and economic assumptions, including those extending beyond the boundaries of existing political communities (for conventional IR, this means states). Goodin (1992) suggests that a distinguishing feature of green theory is its reference to a coherent moral vision – a ‘green theory of value’ – which operates independently of a theory of practices or political agency. For example, a green morality might suggest that human material development should be curtailed in the interest of preserving non-human nature. This would limit our freedom to consume however much we can acquire. The need to put some limits on traditional liberties suggests an approach that puts nature before people. Green theory, in this sense, is ecocentric.

Ecocentrism (ecology-centred thought) stands against anthropocentrism (human-centred thought). This is not because ecocentrism ignores human needs and desires, but rather because it includes those within a wider ecological perspective. Ecocentrism prioritises healthy ecosystems because they are a prerequisite to human health and wellbeing. In contrast, anthropocentrism sees only the short-term instrumental value of nature to humans. This ecocentric/anthropocentric distinction is at the heart of green theory. The holistic ecocentric perspective implies a rejection of the split between domestic and international politics, given that arbitrary boundaries between nations do not coincide with ecosystems. For example, air and water pollution can cross a border and climate change cuts across all borders and populations. Simply, human populations are ecologically interconnected. This impacts on how we understand and deal with transboundary and global environmental issues collectively, setting aside national self-interest.

The traditional IR concern with the state, in an international system of states, is a challenge to thinking about environmental issues. As a central feature of the historical Westphalian model of sovereign (self-determining) nation-states, the concept of sovereignty (ultimate authority) has been particularly troubling. Sovereignty neither describes the modern reality of political control nor offers a reliable basis for human identity or wellbeing. Global environmental problems require global solutions. This requires that we develop our understanding of the ‘global’ as an alternative organising principle and perhaps look to green social movements rather than states for theoretical insights. This gives rise to the question of whether we need to give up on the idea of countries with borders as still being relevant to people’s lives, or recast them in some more ecologically appropriate way with reference to how people live in

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relation to their environment. This will likely entail a more global than local kind of ethics. In part this hinges on our view of the need for political structures (big government, small government or no government) and the level or extent of their development. For example, we could promote centralised global political structures, such as an institution for governing environmental issues (Biermann 2001), or allow a variety of decentralised, even anarchical, interconnected local structures to emerge as circumstances require (Dyer 2014).

Decentralisation, or the transfer of authority and decision-making from central to local bodies, has certain attractive features, such as self-determination and democratic accountability. Ecologically there seem to be advantages as well, since small communities may depend more on immediate local resources and so be more likely to care for their environment. Local communities are more likely to conceive of the natural environment and their relationship to it in less instrumental terms, viewing it more as their home, thus addressing one of the key reasons for the environmental crisis.

For example, the concept of 'bioregionalism', where human society is organised within ecological rather than political boundaries, raises intriguing issues of knowledge, science, history, culture, space and place in an ecological context (McGinnis 1999). For instance, our sense of identity might derive more from familiar environmental surroundings than from the idea of nationality, such that we have greater inherited knowledge and understanding of our local environment than of our political location. However, there are also a number of objections to decentralisation, or greater localisation of decision-making. These include the concern that it would not promote cross-community cooperation as it is too parochial (too exclusively local; the problem of nationalism), and this would mean little chance of developing effective mechanisms to deal with global problems. In effect, it might just reproduce a troublesome sovereign-state model of politics on a smaller scale.

To date IR theory has shown concern with transformations in our political communities but somewhat less concern with transformations in our ecological communities. Perhaps this is because we are not yet sure how a cosmopolitan global sense of community colours our local relationships.

Green theory and climate change

Climate change is the dominant environmental issue of our age, caused by our dangerous reliance on fossil fuels. Green theory helps us to understand this in terms of long-term ecological values rather than short-term human interests. These interests are generally pursued by states through investments in technology, but there is no easy technical solution to human-induced climate change. From the perspective of green theory, this technical impasse requires a change in human values and behaviour and therefore presents an opportunity for political innovation or even a transformative shift in global politics. IR theory can explain why climate change is a difficult problem for states to solve because of economic competition and disincentives to cooperation. However, it cannot provide an alternative framework to explain how this might be addressed. IR remains overly focused on states and their national interests rather than other actors that may be more cooperative, such as cities and communities or non-governmental organisations and green social movements.

A green theory perspective on climate change understands it as a direct consequence of human collective choices. Specifically, these choices have led to historically anthropocentric economic practices of historically arbitrary political groups (states), who have exploited nature in their own short-term interests. Climate change presents a clear case of injustice to both present and future humans who are not responsible for causing it and to the ecosystem as a whole. Therefore, a solution requires an ecocentric theory of value and a more ethical than instrumental attitude to human relations in our common future. Green theory helps us to redefine issues such as climate change in terms of long-term ecological values rather than short-term political interests.

At the international level efforts have been underway since before the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio, which gave rise to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and other environmental agreements. As with many issues caught up in the direct tension between environmental goals and developmental goals, any bargains struck are inadequate compromises.

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For green theory there is no such tension in an ecological path to development, even if that path seems more costly in the short term. This is not least because some countries have developing still to do and hold already developed countries historically responsible for climate change – and no national actor is willing to bear global costs. After faltering efforts to address climate change through the terms of the UNFCCC's Kyoto Protocol, an outline agreement was eventually achieved in the Paris Accords of December 2015. Whether or not this effort will actually address the sources and consequences of climate change remains to be seen, but green theory suggests that a focus on human values and choices in communities is better than a focus on bargaining between states.

In a world of states with primary responsibilities to their own citizens, finding acceptable trade-offs between immediate economic wellbeing and longer-term ecological wellbeing is difficult. There is some prospect of powerful states (like China) or groups of states (like the European Union) leading the way and altering the structural parameters. However, the common ground available from an IR perspective of competing states is unlikely to be anywhere near the common ground envisioned by green theory. More fundamentally, it is unlikely to meet the challenge of climate change. Even with some political agreement, there remain significant differences about responsibility for historic climate change and the costs of adapting to an already changing climate that is affecting the least developed populations hardest. While it is possible for states to cooperate in order to make helpful environmental commitments, this is not directly related to action or change.

In any case, while international agreements are formally implemented by governments and other constitutional bodies, the key agents of change are a much wider range of non-state actors, smaller groups and individuals, which may suggest a kind of anarchy rather than hierarchy. In sum, a green solution to climate change could involve global governance institutions and communities working together – largely bypassing the state – in order to reduce damaging emissions, protect the climate and preserve the planetary ecology on which humans depend.

Green theory equips us with a new vantage point for analysing these developments. It also allows a broader ecological perspective on our common human interests and emphasises choices made within the ecological boundaries of climate change, rather than the political boundaries of economic advantage.

Conclusion

For IR, the contribution of green theory helps us re-examine the relationship between the state, the economy and the environment. IR normally sets this in the context of globalisation viewed from the limited perspective of states and markets – but globalisation also involves opportunities for developing shared global ecological values. Green theory has the potential to radically challenge the idea of sovereign nation states operating in competition and is thus part of the post-Westphalian trend in IR thought. Of course, the greater contribution of green theory, or its capacity for critical engagement with IR, lies in its very different origins – taking planetary ecology as a starting point and looking beyond our current political-economic structures. Green theory is thus able to offer not just an alternative description of our world but also a different logic for understanding it – and how we might act to change it. IR theory is likely to be disrupted and re-oriented by green theory, not so much because greens will win the arguments but because IR theorists will inevitably have to provide a coherent account of how we all live sustainably on our planet. This means that at some point we may have to stop theorising about the state-centric 'inter-national' and find another political point of reference in human relationships, such as policy networks or social movements.

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