

Book Review Essays

Political Ideology and Conflcting Environmental Paradigms

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Bowers, C. A. 2003. *Mindful Conservatism: Rethinking the Ideological and Educational Basis of an Ecologically Sustainable Future*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

Sunderlin, William D. 2003. *Ideology, Social Theory, and the Environment*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

One thing becomes obvious with even a cursory glance at the mountain of books and papers written about the environment, and that is that people come to very different policy conclusions looking at the same set of conditions. Do the trends and current state of our air, water, soil and energy resources call for radical change in how we organize society? Can we instead get by with just some moderate tweaking of our legal code? Do we need to reign in the profit-motive or do we need to unleash our entrepreneurial energies to seek new ways of conserving valuable resources, saving money and increasing profits? If we do need radical change, do we need more or less government or none at all? Do people have inalienable rights to a clean environment, to a satisfying and secure livelihood? How should the costs and benefits of exploiting natural resources be distributed? Who gets to speak for the animals? Is democracy compatible with environmental protection? It quickly becomes clear that the so-called environmental debate is very much about our deeply held beliefs on what is good and right behavior toward the Earth and each other and how we can encourage it widely. What's just and how do we measure justice? Are we as human beings inherently good, smart and loving and need only to be freed from oppression, or

are we innately destructive, needing harsh rules and strong rulers to keep our dark impulses in check?

Environmental analysts, all of us, are guided by how we think about these issues as much as we are by the data. Our ideas about how the world *should* work is part of an *ideology*, our understanding about how the world *does* work is part of a *social theory*. To date, although many (if not all) books about the environment are steeped in ideology and social theory, there have been very few writers who have taken a deliberate and systematic approach to understanding ideological and social theoretical underpinnings of the environmental debate. The two books under review, William Sunderlin's *Ideology, Social Theory and the Environment*, and C. A. Bowers' *Mindful Conservatism: Rethinking the Ideological and Educational Basis of an Ecologically Sustainable Future* are worthy entries into the literature of environmental studies. Both authors suggest that an enhanced understanding of environmental issues, perhaps even wisdom, is the reward for studying the different ideological perspectives apparent in competing environmental analyses. Both suggest that creative cross-pollination between apparently irreconcilable positions can only lead to a richer, more nuanced and practical approach to what Bowers calls "an ecologically sustainable future."

Despite this shared mission, the two writers are quite different. Sunderlin is the more analytical, Bowers the more polemical. *Mindful Conservatism* seeks converts to what he calls an ecologically informed conservatism. In what is in essence an extended essay he rails against neo-liberalism, an ideology known in the awkward language of US politics as neo-conservatism. In modern US practice Liberals tend to support environmental regulation and wilderness conservation while Conservatives protect the free market against those who would impede progress in order to conserve ecosystems that have little or no market value. Surely the time is ripe for looking to social theory for some good explanations as to how and why this weird reversal of common sense definitions of liberalism and conservatism has occurred.

Bowers takes up the task of reclaiming conservatism for those who would conserve, rather than destroy, the earth. He calls upon the conservative tradition of Edmund Burke whose two guiding principles for political and social change Bowers describes thusly: "first, change must be evaluated in terms of whether it contributes to the further well-being of the community; second, decisions about what needs to be conserved, renewed through modifications or rejected need to be based on the 'partnership between those who are living, those who are dead and those who are to be born'" (p. 91). One can easily read in Burke's words the Brundtland Commission's prescription for sustainable development, that is, development that meets the needs of the present without harming future generations' ability to meet their needs. Of course, to undertake a sustainable development path might just require radical social change.

This is Bowers' dilemma and it ultimately makes his arguments less than convincing. The practical implications of a conservative principle based on the well-being of "the community," depend entirely on one's definition of "the

community." For the modern right-winger, the community is either defined by shared "western" values of free-market capitalism or by fundamentalist Christianity, or both. Bowers wants to include all the world's people and its ecosystems in his definition of "community." Well, good for him but this argument is hardly likely to persuade the defensive conservative who sees the well-being of his own community threatened by demands of competing communities. To such minds, the sense of dread seems to require an explanatory other, an enemy. Such a demon would not hesitate to exaggerate environmental problems, creating an atmosphere of crisis in which people would be willing to limit capitalism's freedom.

Bowers wants environmentalists to call themselves *conservatives* because that's what they are about, "which is to conserve the life-supporting characteristics of natural systems as well as the cultural traditions that contribute to long-term sustainability" (p. 39). "Philosophical conservatism," he writes, "attempts to discover the order that inheres in things rather than to impose order on things" (pp. 11–12). The task he takes on for himself is the recovery of a philosophical conservatism deeply consistent with environmental protection. Think of the terms prudence, caution, carefulness. Think about the environmentalists' "precautionary principle." Think about biodiversity protection. But this preference for the "order that inheres in things," is exactly why modern conservatives favor market forces, properties that emerge naturally from the free exchange of goods, over government efforts to impose order, or regulate markets, to achieve environmental objectives.

Bowers faults these market forces. "The current phase of the Industrial Revolution" he writes, "is still being driven by most of the same deep cultural assumptions that were the basis of the earlier and still dominant approach to production: the relentless search for new markets and the need to standardize the lives of people that fit the requirements of the industrial model of production" (p. 27). This standardization and homogenization of cultural diversity destroys exactly those social strategies uniquely adapted to its home ecosystem. The loss of this diversity means a tragic decline in the ability to live well and within the rhythms and constraints of a given bioregion. What is destroyed is exactly what communities need, and is thus contrary to fundamental conservative principles.

Bowers bemoans the "long tradition within academic circles and the media of equating conservatism with promoting corporate interests" (p. 25), while these corporations are the most transformative forces operating in the world today. What he is missing is that aspect of conventional conservatism that favors small government and is inherently distrustful of big government. Who but big government can persistently and effectively stand up to big corporations today? And as corporations and market forces go global, how far behind can global government be? Edmund Burke argued that "change must come from within the community, not be imposed from without." Conservatives are enamored of the way order emerges in free markets and want as little government as possible. If such large-scale governance capacity (if not world government per se) is nec-

essary and inevitable, which I think it is, then the real question becomes how do we build such governance capacity in as democratic and environmentally responsible a way as possible? What options do we have when we organize ourselves into societies, be they local or global?

Questions involving the nature of social organization brings us to the contributions of classic social theory and to William Sunderlin's book, *Ideology, Social Theory and the Environment*. Sunderlin goes beyond Bowers' narrow liberal/conservative dichotomy to describe a complex typology of environmentalisms broadly based on the three foundational traditions of sociology associated with the classic theorists, Emile Durkheim, Max Weber and Karl Marx. Sunderlin reminds us that even though modern environmental concepts, such as ozone depletion, ecosystem integrity and ecological footprints would have been meaningless to these early social theorists, the paradigms they produced to explain the structure of social systems are regularly invoked today by environmental commentators addressing global environmental issues. I should note here that Sunderlin does a superb job of tracking the slightly different meanings of the terms he uses: ideology, social theory and paradigms, concepts that often get muddled in this sort of analysis. Sunderlin defines *ideology* as a mental model of how a society "ought to function to support the livelihoods and/or aspirations of its members or a subgroup of its members" (p. 14). He cites Teun Van Dijk's explanation that "ideologies develop as a functional consequence of the conflicts of interest that emerge from goals, preferences or rights that are seen as mutually conflictual" (p. 15). In the modern era, the most important political ideologies, those that have spawned the familiar left-center-right spectrum, have been those that prescribe the role of the individual, the community and the state in relation to the society-shaping forces inherent in capitalism. *Social theory*, according to Sunderlin, is the formalized body of intellectual thought. *Paradigms* are "analytical representations of ideology in the realm of the social sciences" (p. 26). Paradigms shape how we interrogate social phenomena to uncover the underlying processes that structure society. Sunderlin defines three key paradigms, class, managerial and individualist that form the structure of his analysis:

- "Proponents of the *class paradigm* following Marx, believe history has been shaped by one central societal process: property owners's drive to accumulate capital" (p. 21).
- "Proponents of the *managerial paradigm* [following Weber] focus on the fact that society has come to be dominated by the state and large corporations" (p. 23).
- "Proponents of the *individualist paradigm* [following Durkheim] see increasing differentiation as the central societal process" (p. 25).

From this starting point, Sunderlin's analysis expands as he explores how these different paradigms lead to different ways of understanding the familiar variables of environmental sociology: population, affluence and technology. He

uses this schema subsequently to explain competing viewpoints on the environmental impacts of population, global environmental change and the role of economic growth. The book is peppered throughout with quotes from environmental commentators, many of them familiar to readers of this journal, that are suddenly seen in a new light as one reads in them the echoes and influences of the classical social theorists. Sunderlin wants to point out that in many ways these different paradigms complement each other rather than contradict each other. Each highlights a different feature of social reality. He makes a strong case for paradigm integration as a key to learning our way toward solutions to the environmental problems that haunt the future.

There is one big missing paradigm in this book and it's exactly the paradigm Bowers promotes in *Mindful Conservatism*. All three of Sunderlin's paradigms are based on a foundational belief in progress. Another paradigm considers *progress* both in economic and environmental evolution to be way too simple a notion. Change may be inevitable but progress is often an illusion. This suggests a fourth paradigm. One promoted by Bowers. It is simultaneously conservative and radical belonging both to the left and the right. It serves an ideology concerned about all that is lost through *progress*. It begins perhaps in Western thought with Wordsworth, or the French biophysical economists (physiocrats), is influenced by Gandhi and First Nations philosophies, and taught by Schumacher in *Small is Beautiful*. It has a great deal of influence in environmental thought, especially in radical green circles and can't be neatly traced back to Marx, Weber or Durkheim.

Without addressing this ecological paradigm along with the class, managerial and individualist ones Sunderlin's mission to move environmental discourse from conflict to integration will surely fall short.