Green Political Theory and the State: Context is Everything

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Universalism in Green Political Theory

Green political theory is a lively, sophisticated, and multi-faceted enterprise. Debates concern the degree and character of democracy most conducive to environmental affairs; the meaning of ecological rationality in political life; the extent to which familiar political arrangements merit replacement, and if so whether replacement should be bioregional, eco-anarchistic, decentralized, and participatory; the role of civil society, both domestic and transnational; and how to think about a green(er) state.

But despite the multiplicity and diversity of this work, just about everything done under the heading of green political theory has one important feature in common: an emphasis on universal values and associated projects to the detriment of attention to context. Though not all greens are explicitly insensitive to context, most fail to take seriously the implications of context for green political theory and action. It is this reluctance to think through the implications of context that we will describe and criticize in this essay, paying special attention to the debate between statist and antistatist theorists.

All green theorists believe in the universal applicability of basic green values, to which we have no objection. And we doubt that any of them would explicitly deny that green political action—strategic and tactical choices—must respond to the broader political and institutional context. Yet few greens give any detailed account of how exactly strategy and tactics should be shaped by context. Advocacy for universal values turns out to outweigh attention to context in most green political theory. Hence green theory’s sensitivity to context in principle turns into universalism in practice, thus diminishing the value of green political theory to guide action. Context is everything when it comes to political action.

Before proceeding further, we allow that it might be argued against us that the roots of universalism and contextual insensitivity may be found in political

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theory in general, rather than in green political theory in particular. While a plausible explanation, this is not an adequate excuse for any failings of green theory in particular. We also allow that all green political theory is thinly contextual in the sense that it is located within the context provided by the ecological crises of the contemporary political economy. Some green theorists even acknowledge context in a stronger sense in analyzing, say, opportunities for sustainable development in complex modern societies, less developed societies, liberal capitalism, and the like. But attention to context at that level of generality is not really attention to context at all. For the context of green political action differs from state to state, from society to society. Limiting the range of one’s theory to “developed countries” is usually no more than a disclaimer that the writer in question knows little about less developed countries while assuming that political opportunities available to green activists in developed countries are more or less alike. This is serious mistake.

To say that context is everything is not to say that all of context matters equally. Clearly, some contextual variables are more important for greens to consider than others. Besides, any attempt to consider every potentially significant contextual variable would be quixotic. But there is much fertile ground between casual concessions to context on the one hand and aimless empiricism on the other, and theory helps identify those contextual factors that merit serious attention. Here we have a thicker sense of context in mind, one that looks to variety across time and place within the contemporary era of environmental challenge to the dominant political economy. It is of course up to us to show that these sorts of contextual variations make a difference for green agency and action. Specifically, our aim is to combine theoretical analysis with comparative history in order to provide precepts for guiding choices between state-based and nonstate-based strategies for green activists. But first, let us set out the universalistic emphasis in green political theory in more detail.

In the space allowed by the introductory section of a paper we cannot of course survey every piece of contemporary green political theory in order to pin down its universalistic aspects. We will be more selective, mentioning some standard positions in green debates, then looking more closely at theories that argue for an emphasis on the green state, then examining those green theorists with perhaps the best claims to have escaped universalism. As a prelude to this survey, we begin with a mea culpa for half of us. Dryzek’s *Rational Ecology*1 develops five criteria for the assessment of the ecological rationality of political economic systems, then finds that extant systems (notably markets, administration, polyarchy, law) are all wanting in terms of these five criteria. He then explores the potential of a democratic political economy grounded in communicative rationality and practical reason to meet these five criteria. While proposing a broadly experimental approach to this pursuit, and allowing that

its prospects might vary across time and place, he does not question the idea that the pursuit itself might make sense in some contexts, while other strategies might make sense in other contexts. (Though he still thinks the argument is basically right, especially in its condemnation of the underlying ecological irrationality of prevailing political-economic systems.)

Perhaps the most prominent “standard position” in green debates is the long-standing green enthusiasm for grassroots democracy and decentralization. Important within this theme are bioregionalism² and Bookchin’s³ eco-anarchism. Bioregionalists clearly believe their program is right for everyone, at any time and any place; the whole idea is to create bioregional political units with inhabitants imbued with the appropriate ecological sensibility. Bookchin’s sectarianism is notorious, but even setting that aside, what he proposes is one program for dissolving hierarchy and replacing it with largely self-sufficient communities working along cooperative lines and associating with one another in confederation. The justification for this program is that it is right for humanity given the ecological conditions in which we live; the same might be said for justifications of other green programs.

Green decentralists define one pole of what is perhaps the main axis of debate in contemporary environmental political theory. With the waning of eco-authoritarianism since its 1970s heyday, the other end of the axis is now defined by those who believe in working with rather than against the contemporary state and the political economy in which it is embedded. Notably, Goodin⁴ justifies a “Realo” green position, arguing that greens should drop any “theory of agency” that involves grassroots democracy in favor of working through the established institutions of the liberal state, especially in terms of joining governing coalitions. As a Realo, Goodin would at the level of basic principle accept that strategy and tactics must be adjusted to particular situations. However, he does not say that sometimes greens should adopt his advice about working through institutions, and sometimes depart from it. The structural context of green agency does not figure in his book. For example, he attributes the failure of the British Green Party to the shortcomings of individual green activists,⁵ rather than the inhospitable electoral system. Unless we are to think that attention to context is somehow so obvious it doesn’t need to be stated, we can reasonably take Goodin to argue for a one-size-fits-all statist strategy: “If they [green parties] are to influence policy in the short to medium term, they will have to do so in league with other, older parties.”⁶ As we shall see, joining coalitions as a strategy for green parties can succeed in some contexts such as Germany but is not even on the menu in Britain and the United States. We show,

3. Bookchin 1982, for example.
moreover, that any lack of successful green/non-green coalitions cannot be explained by green activists’ willful ignorance of the rewards to be reaped from pursuing Goodin’s favored strategy.

To date, the most sophisticated attempt to navigate a reasoned path between the statist and anarchist poles of green political thinking has been undertaken by John Barry.7 But even Barry is trying to find one position that makes sense. Barry speaks of his intention “to rank alternative institutional arrangements for dealing with social-environmental relations”8—but clearly he has one ranking in mind. He proposes “collective ecological management” that combines innovative forms of action with transformed state structures as “the most appropriate institutional structure for green politics.”9

Several green theorists have recently advocated variety in response to failed attempts to unify green political thinking around a common program. However, none of these quite develops a contextually sensitive antidote to universalism. David Schlosberg10 finds inspiration for green political practice in a revitalized critical pluralism. Against those who believe there is one proper way to be an environmentalist, Schlosberg points to the kind of plurality that characterizes the environmental justice movement in the United States. Activists within the movement come from very different backgrounds, motivated by very different (often personal and local) concerns. But in a discursively democratic praxis of recognition they find they can make common cause when it comes to particular environmental threats. Pluralism goes along with a network form of organization that does not privilege any organizational center, and so no centralized ideology and program can be imposed. But even Schlosberg implicitly supposes that such critical pluralism is right for the movement, and right for the political theory that underpins the movement, all the time.

A somewhat different kind of pluralism is advocated by Douglas Torgerson.11 Contemplating the shift in the terms of environmental discourse from the emphasis on limits and survival that characterized the 1970s to the stress on sustainability that took hold in the mid-1980s, Torgerson recognizes the multiplicity of meanings that can be attached to the term “sustainable development.” However, Torgerson eschews two common reactions to this multiplicity: one that tries hard to find the single proper meaning of sustainable development, another that suggests dispensing with such an ambiguous and ultimately meaningless concept. Instead, Torgerson argues for a “decentered” approach to sustainability, one that involves multiple experiments with what sustainability can mean in theory and practice. Torgerson is contextually sensitive in that part of his justification for a decentered approach is that sustainability is now the dominant discourse, so we simply have to use it as a starting point, if only to

counter the way it is bent by powerful corporate interests. But even Torgerson implicitly treats his decentered approach as being right for everyone, everywhere. While sympathizing with his basic point, we will show that in at least one case (Norway) a ‘centered’ approach is defensible.

In criticizing these authors (and many others we could have mentioned) for their implicit universalism, we do not mean to suggest that their efforts are misguided. Part of the task of political theory is to highlight the problematic condition of the status quo and expand our imagination in thinking about alternatives to it. Universalistic theory will work perfectly well in these respects. Further, political theory, green or otherwise, is arguably not something that can or should ever be applied in any simple way. There are plenty of intermediate steps between theory and practice, such that theory is only ever going to inform practice in complex and contested fashion.

These excuses provide good defenses for political theory that is imaginative in pointing to institutional possibilities very different from the status quo, such as the radical decentralism of much green theory. But the excuses work less well for green theory more attuned to the institutional status quo, because one major justification for working in that territory is realism, as encapsulated in the “Realo” description of the moderate tendency of the German Greens. One aspect of realism is surely contextual sensitivity, so if statist green theory falls short in this respect, it does so in its own terms. What we mean by contextual sensitivity, however, goes beyond the call that activists must try to make the best of a given situation. If that is the best theory can do, then we might as well stick to ethics and leave politics to the activists. Theory, however, need not be helpless in the face of contextual variety, but for green theory to be green political theory it must take context seriously.

Attention to context means attention to history, so we draw examples from our own detailed comparative studies of the history of environmentalism.12 We do not have the space here to reproduce our full historical analysis of the interaction between the environmental movement and the state in each country since 1970. So what we will do is outline the relationship between the state and social movements represented by each of the countries we have studied and then discuss what sort of strategy makes the most sense in each context by analyzing examples of environmental activism, focusing here on the United States, Norway, and Germany, with occasional mention of the United Kingdom. We will argue that sometimes it makes sense to be a statist, sometimes it makes sense to be an anti-statist, and sometimes it makes sense to combine orientations within, apart from, and against the state. It all depends on the context.

The context that matters most to environmental movements is what sort of state they are trying to green. All states are alike in that state action is constrained by a number of imperatives, regardless of the specific preferences of the government of the day. However, in their orientation to civil society states differ

12. Developed at greater length in Dryzek, Downes, Hunold, Schlosberg, with Hernes forthcoming.
in ways that have real consequences for the ability of environmentalists to link their aims to state imperatives (see Table 1). For present purposes, the most important of these “core” state functions are accumulation and legitimation, to use the language of post-Marxists such as O’Connor\(^\text{13}\) and Offe,\(^\text{14}\) though we prefer “economic imperative” to “accumulation.” States must encourage economic growth by providing a favorable climate for financial investment and business activity in general, so preventing disinvestment and capital flight. Insofar as political stability depends on public support, states must also secure the political economy’s legitimacy. Environmentalists, we argue, have a much better shot at achieving their goals when they can piggyback their agenda onto the state’s economic and/or legitimation imperatives. Two trends that could in principle apply to all contemporary developed societies (but in practice apply differentially) suggest how environmentalists might go about doing so: the rise of ecological modernization and the politicization of risk, whose details we will discuss in due course. But the first state to accept environmentalism into its core did so without the benefit of either of these developments.

**When Statism Made the Most Sense: The United States Around 1970**

It made perfect sense for environmentalists to seek and accept the embrace of the state in the USA around 1970. The antiwar and civil rights movements had radicalized vocal and significant segments of the population. Politically motivated violence—from race riots to assassinations—exacerbated the sense of crisis. Confronted by a plethora of radical demands, the Nixon administration identified the environmental movement as the least threatening element of the counterculture and environmental degradation as perhaps the least intractable of all the major problems on offer at the time. The movement for its part could move smoothly and immediately into policy making because the United States is the best example of a *passively inclusive* polity (see Table 1). Its relatively open and fragmented character induces activists to organize as interest groups in order to influence public policy through lobbying, fundraising, participating in public hearings, litigation, and the like. The state puts up few barriers in the path of organized interests which seek to partake of life inside the Washington Beltway (or in state capitals). The pluralist ethos of American politics promises that government "respond[s] to actions taken by well-organized, politically knowledgeable, and effectively mobilized groups."\(^\text{15}\)

As the thirtieth anniversary of *The Limits to Growth*\(^\text{16}\) reminds us, however, environmentalism in the early 1970s directly challenged the economic imperative by claiming that economic growth was inconsistent with the idea of ecological limits. Thus its embrace by the state is on the face of it puzzling. The move-

\(^{13}\) O’Connor 1973

\(^{14}\) Offe 1984.

\(^{15}\) Camacho 1998, 216.

\(^{16}\) Meadows et al. 1972.
ment’s neo-Malthusian warning that exponential human economic and population growth would eventually violate the fixed quantity of the world’s resources or the capacity of the biosphere to accommodate stress challenged basic economic policy presuppositions. Especially as economic growth showed signs of slowing, the limits discourse failed to make any impression at all on the content of public policy in the United States (or anywhere else).

However, the environmentalism of this era undeniably spawned wide-spread policy innovation in the United States. At the beginning of the 1970s, the United States created a federal Environmental Protection Agency to control pollution, enacted a National Environmental Policy Act requiring all government agencies to consider the effects of their plans via the new device of environmental impact assessment, set up a Council on Environmental Quality to advise the President, and passed a host of significant laws such as the Clean Air Act and Water Pollution Control Act.

The federal government’s acceptance of environmentalism indicates not just that environmentalists were welcomed into the state—in a passively inclusive state, that is never a problem. They immediately reached the state’s core, indicated by the fact that economic concerns were no obstacle to adoption of environmental policies. The reason for this success is that environmentalism could be attached to the state’s legitimation imperative. For a few years the interests of environmentalists (notably cleaner air and water and wilderness preservation) matched a core need of the state (legitimacy). To the Nixon administration, environmentalists looked like the least radical and threatening aspect of the counterculture. By embracing this one movement the Nixon administration, with strong Congressional support, sought to rebuild the political economy’s legitimation without acceding to any more radical counter-cultural demands. Environmentalism did not undermine legitimacy, but other radical movements did threaten the state and liberal democracy. The fact that legitimation was being undermined by the anti-war, civil rights, and New Left movements meant that a movement that could bolster legitimacy in a different direction could be included to profound and lasting effect. Nixon’s 1970 State of the Union address cast the environment as an issue of “common cause” that would move the coun-

try “beyond factions.” Not only was Nixon trying to gain legitimacy in the face of pressure from antirwar and other activists, he hoped to split the environment movement from the New Left—with absolute success.

**When Economics Dominates, Statism Makes Little Sense**

The conditions that enabled the integration of environmentalist concerns into the core of US public policy soon vanished with the waning of the legitimation crisis associated with the counterculture and the onset of energy crisis with the OPEC oil embargo in late 1973. The economic imperative and its associated need for security of energy supply now greatly weakened the bargaining position of environmental interest groups. These groups were not banished from the table, but had to be content with fewer and fewer scraps. A foretaste came with the immediate exemption of the Trans-Alaska Pipeline from environmental impact assessment requirements by a vote of Congress. George W. Bush’s 2001 withdrawal from the Kyoto Protocol on greenhouse gas emissions is simply the latest in a long line of energy-related occasions when environmentalists encountered the economic imperative and lost. This record leads us—but not the major included groups—to question the wisdom of following a statist strategy when the deck is stacked against effective results due to unremitting conflict with the state’s core economic imperative. Eventually radical wilderness defense groups such as Earth First! and the environmental justice movement that arose in the late 1980s and 1990s did question the wisdom of an insider strategy. In a passively inclusive polity, these movements arose largely in response to a kind of passive exclusion practiced by the established major groups in association with government; local activists felt excluded, and so engaged in alternative forms of action. It takes great determination to retain this critical distance in the face of the pull of passive inclusion, and indeed aspects of the environmental justice movement were absorbed into government in the 1990s.18

While we cannot prove that economics dominates environmentalism by examining every conflict over three decades, we can take a brief look at the high point of inclusion and access in the early Clinton years to illustrate our case, for if an insider strategy fails at this time, it surely fails at any time.19 The first two Clinton years are instructive because the Democrats also controlled Congress. These years featured more high-level access for environmentalists in the executive branch than ever before. But the result was a catalogue of disappointments on every major environmental issue, from fuel economy standards and energy taxes to the failure to reform public lands management.

The United States was exceptional in the speed and extent of its embrace of environmentalism in the early 1970s because it alone faced a truly profound legitimation crisis. After the arrival of energy crisis in late 1973 the US ceased to

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19. For more detail on this case, see Dryzek, Hunold, and Schlosberg 2002.
be exceptional; in common with the other states examined in this paper, it gave priority to economics over environment, emphasizing nuclear power and exploitation for new sources of oil and gas. The Carter administration's brief flirtation with conservation soon gave way to an emphasis on synthetic fuels and other expensive and heavily polluting energy supply technologies.

In Norway, the dominance of economics amid energy insecurity confirmed the position of the "hydropower complex" at the heart of policy making, despite the incorporation of environmental organizations into the Norwegian state in the early 1970s. Norway briefly toyed with a nuclear program, but a country with such wealth in hydropower and oil did not need it. Large-scale protests combined with legal and lobbying action and the opposition of the Environment Ministry failed to prevent the construction of a large dam at Alta authorized in 1980; the Environment Ministry was simply excluded from the state's core. Later, energy in Norway meant offshore oil, and environmentalists were unsuccessful in keeping oil exploration out of fragile Northern waters.

In Germany, energy insecurity led to an "environmental moratorium" and wholesale commitment to nuclear power, despite a social movement mobilized against it. Set on this course, the German state in the 1970s and early 1980s refused any point of access to the environmental movement. (Later, the security imperative of the state came into play as Germany accepted the deployment of new nuclear missiles on its soil as the Cold War intensified; peace and anti-nuclear movements were intertwined, as were economic and security imperatives.)

Organized environmentalism had made few inroads in Britain in the 1970s, and a weakly incorporated movement was powerless to prevent the expansion of nuclear power. Energy crisis was just one more reason to exclude environmentalists from the core of the state. Legalistic public inquiries into proposed nuclear developments were a more subtle governmental response than Germany's exclusions, but these inquiries were a sham designed to head off opposition, their pro-nuclear recommendations a foregone conclusion.20

Economic concerns are of course broader than energy supply, and all four countries saw other ways in which economics overrode environmental concerns. For example, in the United Kingdom, the Conservative governments of the 1980s and 1990s saw road construction as vital to economic wellbeing and what Prime Minister Thatcher called "the great car economy." The environmental movement put great effort into trying to stop this program—to little avail, at least until the more radical and confrontational anti-roads movement emerged in the 1990s. In Germany, the creation of a federal Ministry of Environment, Nature Conservation, and Nuclear Safety in 1986 ought to have opened access, but in practice it operated as a co-optive device that kept environmentalists away from the economic core. In the United States, the President's Council on

Sustainable Development was established in 1993, and in 1999 produced a landmark report containing suggestions ranging from control of suburban growth to environmental principles for corporate governance. The report had zero policy impact due to perceived threats to economic growth. The US environmental justice movement has been successful in fighting site-specific hazards—but frustrated whenever it seeks more systemic change. In Norway there are, revealingly, fewer illustrations of economics obliterating environmentalism; the last we can find is in 1989, when the environmental representatives on a key fisheries policy making committee was excluded when major questions about allowable catch were decided.21

Economics, of course, dominates the political agenda of all countries most of the time, so when does it ever make sense for environmentalists to seek to gain access to the core of the state? And why would the state let them in? The groundbreaking US role in environmental policy enabled by a link between legitimation and environmentalism that temporarily overrode economics is now a faint memory. More promising developments have begun in states with very different sorts of orientations to social movements. We turn now to the character of these developments, which while seemingly of universal validity are in practice available on very different terms to different kinds of states. We discuss Norway first, because it is here that the most obvious progress has been made.

Norway: Actively Inclusive Statism and Weak Ecological Modernization

The widespread impression that Norway’s environmental policy record is one of the best in Europe and so the world22 is in many ways justified. Certainly Norway has overtaken the United States (a comparative ranking of the world’s countries on a sustainability index computed in 2001 for the World Economic Forum placed Norway second after Finland, the US eleventh23). The failure of the US President’s Commission on Sustainable Development to have any impact at all on policy can be contrasted with Norway’s systematic embrace of sustainable development since the mid-1980s. The basic idea of sustainable development is that economic growth can be redesigned to respect ecological parameters (as well as principles of intergenerational justice). Perhaps it is not surprising that the idea should flourish in the home of former Prime Minister Brundtland, whose 1987 report to the United Nations, Our Common Future, launched the sustainable development era on the world stage. However, this begs the question of why economics was no obstacle in Norway, while it has proven insurmountable in the United States.

Digging deeper, Norway has since 1991 pioneered a regime of green taxes upon environmentally damaging activities, including a carbon tax on fossil fuel

combustion (business opposition to green taxes remains and has managed to secure some exemptions\textsuperscript{24}—but this resistance has largely been overcome). The “hydropower complex” no longer defines part of the core of the state that is off limits to environmentalists, and no controversial large dams have been built since Alta in the early 1980s. Norway protects wild areas, and pollution is comparatively low (though a small population in a large land area helps here). Environmentalists now sit on key policy-making committees in many government agencies—not just via the Environment Ministry (to which their German counterparts are restricted). It is these committees that really make public policy in this “country of a thousand committees.”\textsuperscript{25} Thus interest group engagement dominates environmental politics, but very differently and to more obvious and direct policy effect than in the United States.

With few exceptions (such as continued controversy over green taxes at the margins), in Norway we see cooperative relationships between business, environmentalists, science, and government. Should we cast Norway as the poster child of environmental statism because all the key actors have embraced it and appear to be happy with its undeniable policy successes? Before rushing to universalize the Norwegian experience, we ought to step back and examine the reasons for its success. There are essentially two reasons: the character of the Norwegian state, and its embrace of a discourse of ecological modernization. The second is universalizable, the first is not.

Norway is an actively inclusive state (see Table 1). It is corporatist in the way it organizes interests into the state but, unlike other corporatist countries, welcomes and indeed fosters many interests beyond business and labor. Groups receive funding (operating and project grants) and organizational support from the Ministry of Environment and other departments, as well as seats on key policy making committees. In return, groups agree to help implement government policy. This “organizational society”\textsuperscript{26} therefore involves tight integration of interest groups into the state, very different from the looser and more competitive arrangements of the United States.

Active inclusion by itself does not however overcome the problem of conflict between economic and environmental concerns, which requires in addition acceptance of ecological modernization by government and key interests. Ecological modernization puts economics and environment in a positive sum relationship—“pollution prevention pays,” in a popular slogan. The idea is that application of environmental criteria such as sustainability and the precautionary principle can make capitalist production more efficient and so profitable. Lower pollution indicates more efficient materials use. It is cheaper to redesign technologies to produce less pollution than to clean up pollution after the fact. Moreover, a clean and healthy environment means happy and productive workers. In this basic or “weak” form (as designated by Christoff,\textsuperscript{27} and de-

\textsuperscript{24} See Kasa 2000.
\textsuperscript{25} Klausen and Opedal 1998.
\textsuperscript{26} Selle and Strømsnes 1998, 5.
\textsuperscript{27} Christoff 1996.
fended by Mol\textsuperscript{28}) ecological modernization leaves the structure of the liberal capitalist political economy intact. Aside from Norway, ecological modernization has found a voice in policy making in Germany, the Netherlands, and other West European countries. It attracts many environmentalists because it requires environmental conservation to be taken seriously even while economics remains the first concern of governments. Environmentalists in actively inclusive Norway are particularly well positioned to join ecological modernization, helping to initiate and control programs in tight association with industry and government. In so doing, they have attached their interests to the state’s core—via the economic imperative—more securely than at any time and place since the United States around 1970.

There is, however, a downside to this success. Norway’s policy committees operate mostly in secret. There is little interchange between group representatives and ordinary members, the latter having even less influence in Norway than in the United States. Secure in their government funding, environmental groups do not need a large membership. The Norwegian Society for the Conservation of Nature is the largest and most important group with 28,000 members. Its counterparts in Sweden (which has about double the population) and Denmark (with about the same population) exceed 200,000 members.\textsuperscript{29} This lack of grassroots influence on policy is exacerbated by the persistent absence of radical activism outside the mainstream groups, in stark contrast to our other three countries. Such activism has been dormant since (unsuccessful) anti-dam protests at Mardøla (1970) and Alta (1980).

The 1990s saw surges of activism in the UK anti-roads movement and US environmental justice movement. In contrast, Norway in the 1990s saw the establishment of the Environmental Home Guard, which has no members, only “participants” who pledge to behave in ways that support sustainable development. The only hint of unorthodoxy exists with the Bellona Foundation, which has staged Greenpeace-style actions. But Bellona is more of “protest business” with no grassroots that also does consultancy for businesses. A small and marginal green party (despite proportional representation, which elsewhere allows green parties to flourish) reflects perhaps the unimportance ascribed by environmentalists to parliament.

Does it matter that Norway’s environmental movement is lacking in numbers, radicalism, activism, and autonomy? This lack, secured by the actively inclusive state structure, guarantees that ecological modernization remains moderate and centrally coordinated, with no room for critique of the underlying makeup of the (heavily oil-dependent) political economy. But if a truly green state requires more than the thin sort of democracy that exists in Norway, then the insubstantial green public sphere and lack of grassroots influence on policy-making (indeed, lack of grassroots) look more troubling. To see how matters

\textsuperscript{28} Mol 1996.
\textsuperscript{29} Selle and Strømsnes 1998.
can be different on that score, we consider how ecological modernization can be radicalized.

**Radicalizing Ecological Modernization in the Risk Society**

Ecological modernization in a stronger form would involve more fundamental transformation of the political economy. Structural change would be on the agenda, rather than reliance on the technological fix. So, for example, rather than promote lower-polluting and more efficient car engines, public policy would address the issue of why private cars are such a large part of the transportation mix, and why cities are constructed with such large distances between homes and workplaces. This strong form has so far generally had little influence in policy making anywhere, though it has made some progress in Germany, as we will see shortly. We argue that its prospects are minimal in the absence (as in Norway) of a critical green public sphere raising fundamental questions, and prompting more discursive and democratic negotiation of the transition to an ecological modernity. This line of reasoning suggests that if you want a more truly green state, you also need a lively and oppositional green public sphere.

Such a critical oppositional sphere is in turn facilitated by the degree to which a polity experiences a risk-related legitimation crisis. In Ulrich Beck’s “risk society” scenario, politics becomes increasingly dominated by conflicts over the generation, distribution, and amelioration of risks concerning nuclear power, genetically modified organisms, food safety, toxic chemicals, and the like. This new politics ushers in a “reflexive modernity” in which postindustrial society faces the unintended consequences of its industrial legacy. Reflexive modernization involves “subpolitics” where nongovernmental actors (including social movements) solve social problems in innovative ways without relying on the administrative state. Subpolitics occurs when environmentalists organize boycotts and protests against corporations—and when they negotiate with corporations to make corporate activities or products less destructive. In the terms we have established, risk society heralds crisis in the state’s legitimation of the political economy. Just as in the very different sort of legitimation crisis that the United States faced in the early 1970s, an opportunity opens for environmentalists to connect their interests to the state’s legitimation imperative. Of course, this connection now applies only to those aspects of their interest that involve risks—especially the risks of pollution and poisoning. This scenario does not play out equally everywhere; notably, the risk society thesis seems to be irrelevant to Norway. However, it does resonate with political developments in our other three countries.

Does this legitimation crisis therefore enable more effective environmentalist action within the state? Beck himself is hard to pin down in these terms. On the one hand, he speaks approvingly of the Greens’ entry into government

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and their subsequent ability to help make public policy. Only when this happens can the partial victory of politics and morality over expert reasoning achieved in the public sphere be turned into “an authoritative environmental politics.” On the other hand, Beck resists the idea that subpolitics is to be taken seriously only if and when disparate risk issues being articulated in the public sphere can be bundled into a cohesive policy package by the state. Despite its lack of cohesion and authoritativeness, subpolitics possesses a rationality of its own. For Beck, therefore, ecological democracy requires a public sphere as well as state institutions—though the critique of expert reasoning always starts to unfold in the public sphere. Beck casts the theory of the risk society in universalist terms: “How does modern society deal with self-generated manufactured uncertainties?” Yet in *World Risk Society* he recognizes that different societies construct risks differently and thus calls for comparative analysis to develop the implications—without actually doing any himself. Still, his call does indicate that he is aware of the need to move beyond universalism in environmental political theory.

Weak ecological modernization can do quite well with conventional state-based politics and more moderate interest group action, as we have seen for Norway. Strong ecological modernization entails a more radical and discursive subpolitics of the sort Beck postulates. Let us now examine Germany with such prospects in mind.

**Germany: Antistatism, Stronger Ecological Modernization, and Subpolitics**

Germany has a different kind of state than Norway. Though, like Norway, corporatist, its orientation toward new social movements has been passively exclusive (see Table 1). In what might be termed Hegel’s victory over Kant, the German state has favored abstract legal norms over liberal rights and provided few opportunities for public participation along the lines we just saw in Norway. In this system of “legal corporatism” certain long-standing interest groups (business, labor, health, social services) are effectively public bodies and cooperate closely with government in making and implementing policy. But any new groups seeking that status faced a secretive bureaucracy suspicious of outsiders. This was clearly true of the new social movements of the 1970s, including environmentalism. Even conventional organizations such as the Federation of Nature Protection (NABU) that predate the protest era have received only restricted access, when they could offer expertise useful to government agencies. Access to the bureaucracy expanded with the establishment of the federal Environment

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36. Lehmburgh and Schmitter 1982; and Ofie 1981.
Ministry in 1986. However, given its marginal involvement in core policymaking,37 this Ministry has performed a co-optive function.

The antistatism of Germany’s new social movements arose against this backdrop of passive exclusion. Their lack of access to the state forced movement groups both to become and remain *movement* groups much more than was true for their US and Norwegian counterparts. The groups and parties formed in the 1970s—Federation of Citizens’ Initiatives for Environmental Protection (BBU), *Die Grünen*, German Federation of Environmental and Nature Protection (BUND)—coalesced around resistance to nuclear power, though this was not the only issue of the day. The peace movement was just as significant, with overlapping membership in environmental and peace organizations being the rule rather than the exception. At the zenith of social movement activity, in 1983, environmental, peace, and women’s groups logged some 9,200 separate protests nationwide.38 The state was closed against movement access; neither Parliament nor the Executive was eager to engage in a nuclear debate, and all the major political parties supported nuclear power.39

Though environmentalists had no direct access to policy-makers, they were not without influence. Following the cancellation of several high-profile nuclear energy projects in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the main parties gradually embraced green policies, including anti-pollution programs, to both limit the electoral prospects of the Greens and curtail protest. This response indicates a risk-related legitimation crisis of the political economy. On the economic front, ecological modernization started to influence policy in the 1980s, when environmentalists remained excluded from government.

Tougher regulations have since significantly ameliorated the worst forms of pollution.40 And nuclear energy—once the cause célèbre of environmental mobilization—is due to be phased out, albeit less quickly than many activists have demanded.41 This decision would have been unthinkable without the antinuclear movement’s influence on social values. It is as true of Germany as anywhere that inclusion means moderation,42 and so deradicalization of the Greens. The difference is that gradual inclusion in the wake of passive exclusion has only partially pulled the rug out from under the more radical wings of the movement. As for the Greens, the former “antiparty” has both changed parliament and been changed by its norms and values. But the transformation is not complete and continues to stir debate within the party: where radicals decry the party’s professionalization and hierarchy,43 pragmatists find in the same trend a source of hope for attracting a wider share of the electorate.44

42. Tarrow 1994.
43. Tiefenbach 1998.
44. Offe 1998; and Raschke 1993.
Passive exclusion in Germany diminished as environmental groups embracing ecological modernization gradually made their way into the state. However, radicals such as the BBU still shun the state, and passive exclusion remains the norm in some areas. Thus the antinuclear movement could still mobilize large numbers of activists in a separate public sphere in the late 1990s. Well-organized protests against shipments of reprocessed nuclear wastes headed for “temporary” storage in Germany took place even after the negotiated nuclear power phase-out. In that bargain, the Green Party consented to future shipments. However, moderate as well as radical environmental groups rejected the Green Party’s compromise, joining nonviolent protests against the shipments in 2001.

This anti-nuclear movement is less comprehensive than the oppositional green public sphere of the 1970s and 1980s, but remains more significant than in our other three countries. Less unremittingly confrontational than before, it has developed a range of strategies. One legacy of passive exclusion is the existence of independent policy institutes. For example, the Institute for Applied Ecology, founded in 1977, carries out research in support of court cases. Thus subpolitics now involves research institutes (including those without movement origins) as well as movement groups, joined by a growing number of for-profit consultancies from which government departments and firms can seek information and advice.

Oppositional public spheres flourish most easily in the presence of a passively exclusive state whose imperatives bear no similarity to movement interests. When imperatives and interests move into accommodation, as with ecological modernization and the rising importance of risk issues, and as passive exclusion eases, then the oppositional sphere can wither. Activists can pursue insider strategies without necessarily being co-opted and frustrated. However, entrenched legal corporatism in Germany means that exclusion has only been lifted partially and unevenly. Thus, especially in the anti-nuclear area, we find a persistent oppositional public sphere. Skeptics here might still argue that contemporary trends in Germany show only that activists have to wait a bit longer before being included than in more inclusive states. But even if the skeptics are right, the terms of that inclusion are significantly different, as we will now argue.

Statism in Perspective

We have argued that ecological modernization means that for the first time environmental interests can be attached to the core economic imperative of states, while risk issues enable renewal of the association with the legitimation imperative previously seen in the US around 1970. Conceivably, these two connections

46. For details, see Hunold 2002.
47. See Rucht and Roose 1999.
might eventually render conservation an additional imperative, creating a green state with the environment as part of its core business. However, ecological modernization and risk-associated legitimation crisis are not present in all states equally. And different kinds of states convert these two developments into quite different sorts of opportunities, to which green political theorists ought to be sensitive.

There really is an important difference between Germany, on the one hand, and the inclusive US and Norway, on the other. Consider the historical point of departure of each of the movements we have analyzed. In the US, the environmental movement did not have to wait long for the state’s offer of inclusion on terms that promised—and delivered—some significant legislative achievements. But the movement’s rather mixed record since the mid 1970s shows that it paid a price for not having had a chance to develop a large and lively oppositional public sphere within which to hone the arguments and critical skills of its members. However, it was very hard for environmentalists to resist the continued pull of passive inclusion—and it took great effort on the part of a new generation of activists in the late 1980s and 1990s to secure limited resistance to this pull.

Our analysis of Germany demonstrates that a passively exclusive state is, ironically, more hospitable to the emergence and maintenance of an autonomous green sphere than is its more inclusive counterparts. Comparative analysis reveals that the character of state-society relations changes the configuration of perils and promises associated with inclusion. Even if activists are headed ultimately for inclusion in the state, it makes a great deal of difference whether they are incorporated as reflexively aware former activists (Germany), or as professionals schooled in moderate bureaucratic organizations (Norway and the United States). Green politicians and activists in Germany remain conscious of the degree to which their successes rely on continued mobilization in civil society.48 The situation is very different in the United States, where leaders of the major groups have a top-down perspective that disparages radical alternatives—as many environmental justice activists have pointed out.

Though we have said less about Britain here, the active exclusion experienced in the Thatcher era (see Table 1) had more serious consequences for environmental movement strategy than the milder passive version practiced across the North Sea in Germany. In Britain after 1988, as active exclusion began to soften, relieved environmentalists readily agreed to rejoin consultations with government around issues of sustainable development in particular. However, mainstream groups were overwhelmed by this turn of events as, in the words of one of our interviewees, they were “barnacle-encrusted” rather than “muscle-bound” with these new obligations. This paralysis was partially relieved by the arrival of an anti-roads movement in the early 1990s, interpreted by Doherty49

as the belated arrival of new social movements in Britain, and later by the emergence of a green public sphere focused on issues of food safety. The experience of the UK suggests that the worst legacy of an era of active exclusion may be in just how easily the mainstream groups were then mollified. Germany here is very different because the legacy of passive exclusion is strongly critical.

This sort of critical democratic legacy may turn out to be even more important in the long run. The significance of state structure is likely to decline as the role of nation-states is being undermined from “below” by regional movements demanding greater cultural and political autonomy and from “above” by economic globalization and political integration. We can say little more about these trends here than to suggest that they are likely to require greater reflexivity and flexibility on the part of movement groups. As movements reevaluate their strategies vis-à-vis states whose power to shape policy appears to be in decline, subpolitics may come to rival classic processes of state-oriented policy-making. Movements rooted in vital green public spheres may well be better prepared to defend their defining interest in these new arenas beyond the state.

We are now in a position to summarize the lessons we have drawn from comparative analysis of the four countries for the possibility and desirability of environmental action in association with the state.

- In the United States, conventional interest group action within the state made perfect sense in the early 1970s. After that, the rewards of such action became meager. However, this did not lead the major groups to change their strategy; either they did not realize what had happened, or they could not resist the incentives provided by passive inclusion. For such an insider strategy to make sense once again, ecological modernization must get on to the US policy agenda. But ecological modernization has made little headway in US policy discourse, still dominated by conflicts between economy and environment. This standoff has been confirmed by the policies of the George W. Bush administration and its supporters in Congress. However, conceptualization of a fundamental conflict between economy and environment applies as much to leaders of environmental groups as it does to conservative anti-environmentalists.50 Public land management is still seen as a fight between wilderness defenders and resource users (loggers, miners, and ranchers). The anti-toxics movement has, as Lois Gibbs (its most well-known spokesperson), puts it, “plugged the toilet” by making it hard for new waste disposal sites to open. But this success has failed to induce industry to devise efficient ways to produce goods while generating less toxic waste. The contemporary American environmental policy paradox is that the public sphere necessary to convert weak into strong ecological modernization did eventually come into existence in the environmental justice and anti-toxics movements. What is missing is weak ecological modernization to begin with.51

50. For rare exceptions, see Gore 1992; and Lovins and Lovins 1999.
Norway illustrates both the accomplishments and limits of a thoroughly statist environmentalism. Environmentalists have long been included in the core of the state, and weak ecological modernization is entrenched here more than anywhere else. However, what we currently see in Norway is probably as good as it gets. In the absence of any signs of a critical green public sphere, nothing stronger can be envisaged. To develop such a sphere of the sort required for stronger ecological modernization and associated subpolitics in Norway would require truly heroic efforts on the part of activists.

Germany is where the prospects for linking the environmental movement’s defining interests to core state imperatives are now strongest. The legal corporatist state long shunned environmentalists and provided few points of access, but otherwise left them free to organize in civil society as they saw fit. The vibrant green public sphere that resulted from the movement’s exclusion, often quite successful in influencing public policy and collective outcomes, also provided environmentalists with the necessary backbone to push for a greener state once the state’s passively exclusive stance began to soften in the late 1980s. (The comparative inability of British environmentalists to take advantage of a parallel erosion of active exclusion in the UK indirectly supports our claim concerning the unintended virtue of passive exclusion.) A dual insider/outsider strategy then came to make sense. Along with the decentralized subpolitics that accompanies risk issues, Germany features a stronger form of ecological modernization than other states. The implication is that an interesting range of strategies with, against, and aside from the state is now available.

The United Kingdom, a more complex case that we have treated more briefly, long illustrated the futility of conventional interest group action in the context of an unresponsive and indeed hostile state that tried to undermine the ability of environmentalists and others to organize and articulate their demands. Unlike Germany, no oppositional sphere emerged until (paradoxically) that state became more responsive in the 1990s. As the UK slowly shakes off the legacies of active exclusion, a more interesting mix of strategic possibilities for environmentalism opens. Ecological modernization was long resisted in Britain, where government insisted on scientific proof of a hazard before acting, the opposite of the precautionary principle. But even in Britain, ecological modernization began to make inroads around 2000. The Department of Trade and Industry embraced photovoltaic energy. The Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution recommended discursive and democratic reconfiguration of pollution control (with little response to date from government). And in 2001 a Climate Change Levy on fossil fuels used by industry and government was introduced.

The general point is that sometimes statist strategies make sense, sometimes more confrontational action is more rewarding, and sometimes a mix of
these two can be pursued to good effect. Thus we are not statists, or anti-statists, or relativists; we are contextualists.

**Metatheoretical Conclusion: Combining Political Theory and Comparative History**

Environmentalism and environmental political theory are both quite youthful enterprises. Environmentalism only began under that name in the late 1960s (though of course it has antecedents stretching back over a century). The relevant political theory that began to emerge in the 1970s was crude and Hobbesian, the main more sophisticated exception being Bookchin’s eco-anarchism. It took some time to go beyond these limited beginnings. Youth is actually a good excuse for inattention to history. For if environmental concerns provide an entirely novel challenge to industrial society and industrialism, and if government and politics have never previously tried to respond to that challenge, then the main task is clearly to think imaginatively about how the political world could be different.

But now we have a history of three and a half decades of environmental concern and political response. Moreover, there is not just one history, there are many histories, as environmental challenges have been met (or ignored or scorned) in very different ways in different societies and polities. Here we include polities other than the state, covering regional political structures such as the European Union, local governments, international regimes and networks, and global institutions. Thus there is plenty of grist for assessment of how different sorts of theoretical positions might play out in different situations.

Of course, many green proposals have not received a trial anywhere, and this becomes increasingly true with the radicalism of the proposal. So again, radicals have more reason than moderates—statist moderates in particular—for insensitivity to contextual variation in their models. But often there are relevant experiences that can be drawn upon. For example, bioregionalism at one level proposes wholesale political reorganization and transformed consciousness—about as radical a green program as can be imagined. But at another level bioregional authorities already exist in the form of river basin commissions and the like, some of which consciously engage in ecosystem management. Of course, such bodies have to coexist with more established forms of political authority, and generally they have not been able to benefit from much in the way of ecocentric consciousness on the part of the relevant human populations. Yet we can still draw lessons from their experiences. We might ask, for example, whether small doses of bioregionalism are actually counterproductive in the presence of (say) a conventional administrative state, or whether on the other hand they actually erode some of the ecologically questionable aspects of that state. We could also investigate whether or not the presence of bioregional au-

authorities itself promotes or impedes the development of ecosystemic awareness on the part of key political actors and/or a broader public. In comparative terms, we might ask whether such innovations have prospered more or less when a state adopts ecological modernization as policy, or whether inclusive states are good or bad for bioregional development. For example, it might be the case that if a state is relatively exclusive in its orientation to social movements, those movements might instead focus their energies on novel alternative political structures such as river basin commissions, to the benefit of the latter. (This is just a hypothesis, we have no idea whether it holds in practice.)

The dynamics of history can also be instructive. In the United States at the federal level, a mostly unchanging structure of government (the “passive inclusion” of pluralism) is overlain by radical shifts in the environmental attitudes of presidential administrations and congressional majorities. As we have seen, particular political circumstances in the United States can make environmental action of the conventional interest group variety sometimes very productive, sometimes futile. A very different dynamic is observable in Germany, where a political history of passive exclusion produces a dynamic green public sphere that in turn enables a relatively strong version of ecological modernization to be pursued once the state becomes somewhat more inclusive, beginning in the late 1980s. Again, this finding is historically contingent.

These sorts of experiences provide plenty of useful material for the theorist. Here we are not referring to just horror stories about particularly disastrous governments or international organizations, or fables about how green some particular innovation or place really is. Instead, what we advocate is systematic comparative history, which can explode the stylized facts that political theorists of all sorts (not just greens) often trade in. This is hard work: but as Max Weber once pointed out, politics is often about the slow boring of hard boards.

This is not to say comparative history should replace political theory. That would be both very constraining and very conservative, for how then could anything different be imagined? What we recommend is a productive dialogue between comparative history and political theory, to the benefit of both. In this dialogue, political theory provides the imagination and inspiration, and guides us to the salient points in history, highlighting negative and positive experiences. Comparative history for its part is much more than a reality check on idealistic proposals. It is also a source of ideas and insights about real possibilities for green change.

References


