

Shades of green

Environment



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Less than a decade into the 21st century, our planet witnessed a sneak preview of environmental devastation: wildfires in the frigid climate of Alaska, disastrous floods in India and catastrophic drought in normally humid Brazil. It is in the face of disasters like these that individuals with ecologically-concerned environmental sympathies have, over the latter half of the twentieth century, frequently admonished the potential for unchecked economic expansion to create planetary devastation.

For the most part, current discussion and concern regarding such environmental issues as climate change and biodiversity revolve around media coverage devoted to celebrity advocacy. Once the sole province of low-profile character actors with hybrid bicycles, the momentum to save the planet is now driven by famous marquee names. Fame has now become fully integrated into the toolbox of environmental advocacy, allowing celebrities to assuage their guilt over the fortune they have acquired from album sales and box office receipts.

Consider for example, the increasing trend of entertainers purchasing offsets to compensate for carbon dioxide emissions generated by their activities. Steve Kotler notes that in essence, they pledge carbon neutrality by determining how much they emit in an average year then sign checks in the name of companies who balance the eco-math by planting trees or putting methane into anaerobic digestion. Director Roland Emmerich paid \$200, 000 out of his own pocket to make *The Day After Tomorrow* carbon neutral while the Dave Matthews Band has spent money to offset the emissions generated by 15 years of performances and television appearances.

Other entertainers have taken to the green movement by attaching their name in various ways to enterprises devoted to environmentally-oriented causes. Edward Norton, an intense performer from such films as *Primal Fear* and *American History X*, is most associated with The Enterprise Foundation, which provides low-income housing. Together with a solar energy company, Norton founded an initiative that provides solar energy systems for low-income households. Leonardo DiCaprio is not only the brooding presence from such films as *The Departed* and *Blood Diamond*, but a hybrid-driving commercial flight-taking environmental advocate.

Public awareness of his alignment with environmental issues has been raised by his involvement with the 2007 eco-documentary *The 11th Hour*. In discussing the involvement of rapper-entrepreneur Jay-Z with the United Nations Development Program to promote awareness on underdeveloped water supply and infrastructure in rural and urban communities, Jonathan Greenblatt notes that we must observe the relationship between celebrities and causes rather cautiously: ...the glorification of issues through celebrity engagement creates both opportunities and challenges.

It would be foolish to dispute the value of widening public engagement on pressing global issues that demand our attention. Celebrities attract the attention of those who otherwise might skip the world news sections of the local paper. Some might discount the impact of such engagement, but I think that their enfranchisement has enormous potential. ”

Such caution rests on the fact that the value of celebrity enfranchisement rests on what direction and action may results from such leveraged publicity.

In essence, the personification of causes must inspire the uninvolved to take action, rather than lead them to believe that activism comes from strategic shopping or remote control choices. “ As time wears on, more young people will watch the images and come to understand the horrendous conditions that Jay-Z beheld in Africa. But then we must ask the question – what comes next? ” Greenblatt asks.

Regardless of how awareness regarding environmentalism is generated, true progress for it (like any cause) takes the form of decisions and choices, a commitment to initiate practices that address the issues concerned, just as gender equality begins with interpersonal and social contracts and cognitive reframing and vegetarianism requires lifestyle choices regarding dietary habits. In the 20th century, individual strategies of engagement with environmentalist concerns were conceptually placed on a spectrum of green between dark green and light green.

Sharon Beder, a professor of sociology from Australia, notes that this spectrum is one that is discontinuous, that is to say that dark green environmentalism and light green environmentalism are two distinct categories that are paradigmatically divided. This is not to suggest that ideology is reduced to these two categories, but that the underlying paradigms reflect of a division of engagement strategies. Dark or deep green environmentalists regard the dominant political and social ideologies as inherently flawed and contributive to ecological damage.

As such, they are fundamentally opposed to unchecked growth, rampant consumerism and extreme forms of capitalism and industrialism. As such,

their passion regarding environmental issues manifests itself in profound lifestyle changes and a willingness to confront the dominant social institutions (i. e. corporations and government) responsible for creating the conditions that let ecological damage go unaddressed. By contrast, light greens do not view environmental protection as a distinct political ideology that is contrary to the interests of above institutions.

They do not seek the political emasculation of industrialism and capitalism but emphasize environmentalism as a lifestyle alternative instead. They substitute the tactics of confrontation with strategic consumption and a conscientious approach to the conventions of modern living. The New York Times notes that, “ it is not so easy to conserve within a culture of affluence whose environmentally costly components have almost become entitlements. ” As such, light green environmentalists make no pretense of possessing the same subversive aspirations of their dark or deep green counterparts.

Critics of light greens derogatorily assert that their ideology can largely be reduced to “ Green is the new black,” faulting them for reducing environmentalist activity to greenwashed forms of consumerism. Alex Steffen summarizes these criticisms with the mantra, “ You can’t shop your way to sustainability,” and argues that the small steps which light greens engage in are frequently promoted because of their inability to threaten the status quo: “ They don't depress sales of fashionable crap we don't need. They don't bring people into the streets or sweep corrupt politicians from office.

They certainly don't threaten the powerful, entrenched interests who are growing fantastically rich off keeping us locked into the systems that make our lives such a burden on the planet and impoverish our brothers and sisters elsewhere. " This is not to suggest that the only true form of environmentalism is a hard-core devotion to deep green environmentalism. One of the difficulties of that line of thinking is that it is difficult to determine the lines that separate the radical confrontation of political and corporate structures from a road that leads to downright eco-terrorism.

Runyon defines eco-terrorism quite simply as " any crime committed in the name of saving nature. " This includes but is not limited to: arson, burglary, death threats, vandalism and trespassing directed against individuals and groups engaged in activity deemed to be threatening to the planet's ecology such as animal research labs, logging camps, ' unclean' power facilities. Such activity is done with the intent of changing behavior and public policy, or at the very least rendering environmental devastation as unprofitable or economically unfeasible.

Runyon posits that the origins of eco-terrorism begin with the publication of Edward Abbey's *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, in which four eco-saboteurs go on a criminal rampage to express their rage against unchecked ' progress' and development. Examples of organizations and movements deemed eco-terrorist in nature include the Animal Liberation Front, which opposes animal experimentation and perceived mistreatment by releasing animals and destroying animal research laboratories.

It is a movement that exemplifies leaderless resistance, and as such ALF is merely the name which animal liberation activists operate under. The Earth Liberation Front is its environmental counterpart, which also operates under the terms of leaderless resistance: decentralized across autonomous cells bent on inflicting damage on those who profit from environmental devastation while simultaneously exposing environmental atrocities. The ELF brands itself as a non-violent organization because they aim to engage in criminal activity in which humans and animals are not harmed.

In essence, eco-terrorism is the logical extreme of what happens when environmentally concerned individuals find the radical reforms sought by deep green environmentalism and the lifestyle adjustments made by light green environmentalism to be lacking. Steffen argues that the reason why conventional environmentalist rhetoric (as represented by the totality of deep green and light green environmentalist thinking) fails to convince the public or engage their imagination is that the solutions they present are either trivial or downright unappealing: They called for tightening belts and curbing appetites, turning down the thermostat and living lower on the food chain.

They rejected technology, business, and prosperity in favor of returning to a simpler way of life. No wonder the movement got so little traction. Asking people in the world's wealthiest, most advanced societies to turn their backs on the very forces that drove such abundance is naive at best. " It is from this context that the concept of bright green environmentalism has emerged, which is rapidly gaining currency as a new platform for pursuing the goals of environmentalist movements in general.

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Emma McCreary concisely describes bright green environmentalism as the reconciliation between the guilt of modern living and the desire for sustainability. Radical changes in economics and politics are made possible through the use of technology. As Ross Robertson notes: "...it is less about the problems and limitations we need to overcome than the " tools, models, and ideas" that already exist for overcoming them. It forgoes the bleakness of protest and dissent for the energizing confidence of constructive solutions. "

The primary ideological contentions of bright green environmentalism are a) it is difficult to demand socio-political adjustments that undo the industrialist and capitalist paradigms of society which deep green environmentalists assert as being intrinsically damaging; and b) the lifestyle adjustments that light green environmentalists espouse – bringing your own bag to the grocery, reusing bottles – are ultimately trivial in relation to our ecological problems. What bright green environmentalism does espouse are creative solutions and innovative approaches to problems.

They endorse a political stance of optimism, as scenario engineer Jamais Cascio notes, while people like to imagine awful futures for a myriad number of reasons, the inability to imagine positive futures discourages creative thinking and imagination: " We're under no illusions. The world is stumbling its way to hell, environmentally, politically, economically -- but whining about it isn't going to change it. What can give us hope is a combination of good ideas, novel tools, innovative technologies, unexpected collaboration, and healthy doses of democracy and transparency. So that's what we talk about here. "

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To that end, bright green environmentalists embrace new forms of energy production, manufacturing, biotechnology, urban planning and other forms of sustainable design technologies as a means of retrofitting the present capitalist-industrialist mode of life rather than seeking to overthrow it. They celebrate the potential for economic abundance and material plenitude without compromising ecological sustainability. The goal is one-planet living in which the lifestyle of the average American continues to be luxurious, as well as equitably distributed among classes but without denying non-Americans of that kind of luxury.

Steffen defends present aspirations of material luxury across the globe: “Humanity’s appetite for better living is also growing. [The “developed” and “developing” worlds] now live around the corner from each other, mutually dependent. ... People who live in shanties can compare the material quality of their own lives with that of people who fly over them in jets. ... What the kids want, from Cape Town to Caracas to Novosibirsk, and everywhere in between, is to live like Americans. ... It’s wrong to think that we are going to talk them out of pursuing that. ” (17-18)

To accomplish that, technological development to further economic gains must emphasize one-planet living and minimized ecological footprints on a sustainable level: The quality of life can actually be improved even while ecological footprints shrink. In a nutshell, bright green environmentalism celebrates the idea that you don’t need terrorism to incite change, nor do you need to subscribe to the virtues of asceticism to do so. You just need smartly designed technologies. To be fair, there is very little reason to self-

righteously judge one person's brand of environmentalism as inherently better or 'purer' than another's.

David Roberts notes that being an environmentalist lacks any underlying metaphysical essence and to claim otherwise is a "moral judgment masquerading as an assertion of fact." As such, discussions regarding who do or do not count as environmentalists serve little purpose other than to valorize the biases and preconceptions of those involved. Roberts concludes that "Those of us on more or less the same side gain very little by furiously judging each other's personal choices in a futile attempt to define the tribal boundaries of environmentalism."