

Green Delusions: An Environmentalist Critique of Radical Environmentalism

by Martin Lewis

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Reviewed by Doug Badow

George Bush wanted to be the environmental president, but even his heavy-handed regulatory policies did not satisfy the environmental lobby. Now we have the environmental vice president, for whom conservation seems to be a religious duty, and a bevy of left-wing Clinton appointees, for whom cost appears to be no object. The result is likely to be a concerted attack not only on business, but on the entire market system.

Indeed, what makes future prospects so frightening is the fact that an important segment of the environmental movement is fundamentally antagonistic to modern society. These eco-radicals, as Martin Lewis, a professor at George Washington University, calls them, "concur in one central proposition: that human society, as it is now constituted, is utterly unsustainable and must be reconstructed according to an entirely different socioeconomic logic."

Lewis, a mainstream environmentalist, doesn't much like "anti-environmentalists" like Julian Simon and Dixy Lee Ray, who "present a comforting vision to those who shudder at the thought of the sacrifices that will be necessary to ensure the ecological health of the planet." But he also recognizes the existence of "a much less visible ideological threat at work as well, one that masquerades under the mantle of environmentalism itself." Thus, Lewis devotes *Green Delusions* to explaining and debunking several important strains of radical environmentalism.

There are, for instance, the Deep Ecologists. The "moderates" merely want to radically downsize human activity; the true radicals, whom Lewis calls "primitivists," are characterized by "blatant misanthropy and glorification of violence." A bit more

positive towards humanity are quasi-classical leftists—the eco-anarchists and eco-Marxists. They differ from traditional Marxists in believing that economic growth cannot continue forever even under Communism, but still focus more on economic than environmental issues. Then there are the eco-feminists, many of whom, writes Lewis, "are actively reviving the goddess-centered cults that they believe once allowed humans to live in harmony with nature." Despite the presence of Marxists, many members of this odd amalgam are neither left nor right, but instead are simple authoritarians who are not just unconcerned about human freedom, but actively oppose it.

Lewis ably dissects the logical fallacies behind all of these philosophies. The radical position that primal peoples exemplified the proper harmony with nature, Lewis writes, is "so exaggerated as to verge on intellectual fraud." Moreover, he argues, small can be ugly as well as beautiful. Even more important, he recognizes the virtues of free choice. For instance, although he doesn't care for urban living, he acknowledges that "there is nothing intrinsically wrong with such a personal decision."

Similarly, Lewis is no technophobe, pointing out that scientific advances can help better protect the environment. Nor does he see population growth in the Third World as an unmitigated disaster. And he dismisses environmentalist tirades against capitalism by pointing to the environmental devastation in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. "As is now abundantly clear, Marxism's record is dismal on almost every score, be it economic, social, or environmental. These failures cannot be dismissed as errant quirks; Marxian regimes have come to power in numerous countries, and everywhere the results have been disheartening."

For all of the strength of Lewis' analysis, he remains committed to an activist state to combat what he believes to be very serious environmental problems. What he wants is "guided capitalism," where "a new alliance of moderates from both the left and the

right” press for “the environmental reforms necessary to ensure planetary survival.” Of course, government’s past guidance has seldom proved to be fiscally or environmentally sound.

Still, *Green Delusions* offers an important call for ecological sanity. And Lewis, coming from the moderate left, has more credibility than, say, Julian Simon in debunking the nostrums of the eco-radicals. Given the threat to liberty posed by the current administration and the more extreme environmentalists, people like Lewis could end up proving to be important allies of those who believe in individual liberty and fiscal responsibility as well as environmental protection. □

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On Liberty, Society, and Politics: The Essential Essays of William Graham Sumner

edited by Robert C. Bannister

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424 + xiii pages • \$30.00 cloth

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Reviewed by John Attarian

Few thinkers suffer more at the hands of leftist statists than William Graham Sumner, routinely depicted as a heartless Social Darwinist and a reactionary bigot opposing social reform. Now that the activist government his critics craved has bogged in deficits and failures, Sumner deserves reconsideration.

This collection of 33 of Sumner’s essays, some previously unpublished, facilitates that reappraisal, handily drawing together such important pieces as “The Forgotten Man,” “Republican Government,” “The Argument Against Protective Taxes,” “Liberty,” and “The Absurd Effort to Make the World Over.”

Unbiased reading of Sumner dispels the

left’s caricature. In “The Forgotten Man” he does *not* oppose helping the unfortunate. What he *does* oppose is glossing over the fact that all aid comes at the expense of the “forgotten man”—the ordinary, thrifty, industrious, virtuous, law-abiding citizen. “Socialism” firmly defends private property—but sharply distinguishes liberty married to responsibility, which Sumner vigorously upholds, from license, which he condemns.

Some essays are especially timely. “Republican Government” warns that in assuming “a high state of intelligence, political sense, and public virtue” in the citizens, republican government demands too much of human nature. “The citizen must know how to obey before he can command, and the only man who is fit to help govern the community is the man who can govern himself.” Our “greatest danger,” though, is from special interests: They are organized and highly motivated, while the people are “ill-informed, unorganized, and more or less indifferent. There is no wonder that victory remains with the interests. Government by interests produces no statesmen, but only attorneys.” Hence, he warns in “Democracy and Plutocracy,” government intervention against business is unwise. Reformers will not wield government power forever; business will seek that power in self-defense, and resort to “all the vices of plutocracy,” corrupting both business and government. All too true.

Repeatedly, Sumner argues that capital accumulation makes civilization possible. What harms capital drags down civilization. Our overregulation and tax-borrow-and-spend dissipation of capital and their harmful impact on our national life make Sumner again look far wiser than his critics.

“The Argument Against Protective Taxes” demolishes arguments for tariffs and exposes the heart of protectionism—indeed, of all redistribution:

A wants protection, that is, he wants B’s money. B does not want to let him have it. A talks sentiment and metaphysics . . . all there is in it is that he wants B’s money. . . . He is then moved to scorn at B’s sordid love of money. . . . For him to want B’s