The Conservative Ecologist and Free Market Environmentalism: Classical Liberalism Reasserted

Edward T. Wimberley, Florida Gulf Coast University, U.S.A.
Bradley Hobbs, Florida Gulf Coast University, U.S.A.

Abstract: The "conservative ecologist" represents those persons who value the environment but who do so from within the context of classic liberalism, with its emphasis upon individual liberty within a democratic society. Consequently, while such persons are considered conservative only to the degree that modern progressives have co-opted the term "liberal" to reflect their own comparatively socialistic values, they particularly cherish individual freedom and liberty – especially in terms of making free choices within the marketplace – over any other ecological value. The conservative ecologist could be described as more ideologically affiliated with libertarianism than with socialism. Their orientation is not valued within the modern environmental movement and is in fact antithetical to the political-economic vision of that movement. This paper discusses the nuances of the role of the "conservative ecologist" within the comparatively collectivist environmental mainstream, describing how collectivist approaches to social and environmental ecology have failed while classically liberal, pro-free-market approaches create sufficient affluence to allow for environmental protection and sustainability.

Keywords: Free Market, Environmentalism

Introduction

If you peruse any of a number of popular texts currently utilized in colleges and universities across the United States, Canada and throughout Europe, pertaining to environmental philosophy, policy, ethics and education, you can't help but notice that there appears to be an underlying consensus that free market economic systems and classical "liberalism" which focuses upon the rights and privileges of individuals pose a certain and enduring threat for the world's environment. By contrast, Marxism's advocates argue that its collectivist values serve to protect the environment when ecosystems and their inhabitants are included within the collective (Benton, 1996; Burkett, 1999). Marxism has been criticized for it's principally anthropocentric orientation that in the minds of some necessarily renders it "anti-green" (Grundmann, 1991). However, capitalism with its tradition of individual decision-making and autonomy in the market place has taken the brunt of criticism as the principal factor responsible for environmental destruction and in the minds of many is considered to be the root cause of the planet's environmental woes (Williams, 2010). This widespread belief that capitalism produces environmental despoliation has resulted in a pervasive anti-capitalistic bias that has become accepted within the environmentalist movement as the "politically correct" perspective. Consequently, a bureaucratic and regulatory hegemony based upon compulsion is seen as the only path capable of avoiding certain environmental disaster by curbing the worst characteristics of capitalism. Such approaches have historically been advocated by any number of prominent environmental thinkers whose political values are closely aligned with the principles of socialism and Marxism (Kovel, 2007; Bookchin, 2004; Pepper, 1993; Mellor, 1998; Salleh, 1997) and who favor resource redistribution in the pursuit of eco-justice (Bakken, 2000; Bahro, 1994; Pastor, 1993).

Market solutions based upon individual rights, responsibilities and initiative have been largely deemed to be "politically incorrect" (Foster et al., 2010). For better or worse, the underlying utilitarian and self-actualizing values of classic liberalism have become inextricably

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associated with all of the bad habits humans have acquired in regard to their relationship with the environment. Classically liberal approaches to not only economics but politics, religious faith, self-expression and self-realization are deemed ineffective, outdated, passé and politically unacceptable.

The political environment of the modern environmental movement requires these capitalistic values to be systematically rooted out and replaced with new and seemingly more environmentally friendly values, perspectives, behaviors and economics (Orr, 2009). Nowhere is this sentiment stated more clearly or succinctly than by Susan George of the Transnational Institute who asserts that "We can't reverse the ecological and climate crises under capitalism" (George, 2007). Accordingly, the prescribed cure for classically liberal political values and free-market economic tenets is to turn to the coordinated action of governments – state, national and international – to manage economies minimally along the lines prescribed by Keynesian economics or more thoroughly by means of a socialistic or Marxist perspective (George, 2007; Williams, 2010; Foster, 2000).

Proponents of these approaches advocate substituting direct and indirect control over the economy in lieu of free market control (Li, 2008). The essence of this cure is to embrace expanded state authority (ultimately to the global level) with or without the consent of the governed to own or strictly oversee whole sectors of the economy (e.g. energy, transportation, finance, etc.) in the interest of accomplishing socio-political-economic-ecological goals. The result is a "global collective" governmental entity or authority that seeks to address issues that are considered too complex to be dealt with at any other level. Proponents of this approach consider the need for global collective action to be the inevitable outcome of the growth of globalization and the failure of capitalism, nationalism and local initiative to solve pressing global problems (Sanders, 2004; Pastor, 1993).

The rationale for such a far-reaching change in the nation's political-economic environment centers upon a deep sense of cynicism regarding the capacity of citizens and consumers to act in an environmentally sensitive and sustainable fashion. From this perspective, individuals are stereotyped as being shortsighted, and greedy (Rolston, 2006, p. 389). Ultimately such rapacious individuals are deemed incapable of realizing common good through the exercise of their preferences within a democratic free-market system. Consequently, in the interest of protecting the planet some call for the suspension of democracy and all it implies while the ecological crisis is sorted out.

James Lovelock, author of the Gaia theory, questions whether human beings are clever enough to solve the planet's environmental problems. Accordingly Lovelock observes that (Hickman, 2010)

> "We need a more authoritarian world. We've become a sort of cheeky, egalitarian world where everyone can have their say. It's all very well, but there are certain circumstances--a war is a typical example--where you can't do that...even the best democracies agree that when a major war approaches, democracy must be put on hold for a while."

The nexus of this political-economic-ecological transformation is the substitution of the collective interest – now dramatically expanded to include the interests of the planet as a whole - for that of the individual and community. Democratic government at even the national level is deemed to be inadequate for the ecological challenges facing the world so a new approach - "planetary management" – is emerging in recognition that "environmental resources can no longer be confined within national or regional boundaries in the age of globalization" (Huey, 2009, p. 285).

In the opinion of some this planetary management should be entrusted to a world government whose authority would transcend the sovereignty of individual nations. Accordingly, advocates for globally concentrated environmental power such as Alanna Hartzok of the Earth Rights Institute conceptualize planetary management not in terms of "populations and boundary

lines" but rather in terms of the enforceable "demarcation of power and control over the earth." Hartzok asserts that the central issue to be debated is the "formal attribute of sovereignty." Accordingly, "to speak of enforceable world law is to speak of world power. A world legislature would have the power to make the laws of the land and to make the rules for the territory of the earth" (Harzok, 1995)

In the face of such global absolute power the historical emphasis upon the individual within the context of the society and the relationship of the individual to the state that has traditionally characterized classical liberalism is rejected. Ecological health, it would seem, can no longer be expected to survive the onslaught of individuals acting in their own self-interest (where self-interest is naively defined as greedy, capricious and selfishness). The continued tolerance of expressions of individual preference via free markets is construed as being completely antithetical to the goals of ecological sustainability. Accordingly, individualism must be replaced with the global collective in community consciousness, social intercourse, politics and economics. A firm rejection of individual differences in the realm of political ideals and a deep embrace of the global interests of not only human individuals but of all flora, fauna and ecosystems appears to be the consensus among many of those who would shape the future of the world to promote ecological values which they deem to be superior and preeminent (Foster, 2009a; 2009b).

Ecological Sustainability versus Individual Liberty

The prevailing wisdom within the contemporary environmental movement assumes a distinctly anti-capitalistic perspective on resolving our ecological problems – particularly regarding those associated with climate change. Critics who hold capitalism responsible for our most vexing environmental problems perceive these issues as the inevitable product of individualistically oriented fetid free-marketing gone amuck. As Pace University professor and socialist advocate Chris Williams observed "The blind, unplanned drive to accumulate that is the hallmark of capitalist production—the profit motive—has created the problem of climate change" (Williams, 2008).

The unavoidable implications of this perspective is that individual freedom, liberty and autonomy constitutes an imminent threat to the planet that must be curtailed and replaced with a globally oriented environmentalism that encompasses the entirety of nature and humanity within the bounds of a political collective that is centrally administered. As a consequence pursuing ecological sustainability necessitates restricting individual freedom and autonomy and abandoning free-market approaches to the environment. If one conceptualizes, for instance, a "green continuum" (Beder, 1991) in which one extremity is " light green" through the pursuit of environmental outcomes via individually oriented free market transactions and the other extremity represents a "dark green" option in which the discretion of the collective society is imposed upon individual preferences by a government-driven economy, then what is sacrificed along the continuum as one moves from free-market individualism to collectivism is nothing less than individual liberty, freedom and market discretion.

Interestingly enough, while a globalist approach erodes the discretion and freedom of the individual, the target of such thinkers is not the individual capitalist as much as it is the ruling elite within the capitalist system who seemingly behave in politically and ecologically unsustainable ways (Foster, 2009a). As prominent Marxist ecological analyst and University of Oregon sociologist John Bellamy Foster observed "The problems of empire, the problems of ecology and the problems of economy are all related to this crisis of capitalism, the crisis of our civilization as it exists" (Foster, 2009b). In Foster's opinion traditional individualistic, capitalist, market-oriented approaches to economics – driven as they are by an elite ruling class - must be completely abandoned in favor of a "political economy" in which it is "understood that the

economy is subject to public control and should be wrested from the domination of the ruling class" (Foster, 2009c).

Such domination requires dismantling the current structure of wealth and economic capacity and redistributing these resources in the interest of achieving social, economic and ecological justice. The greater the degree to which a political-economic system founded upon the free exchange of goods and services at the discretion of citizen-consumers is surrendered to a collectivist conceived governmental redistributive authority the greater the extent to which liberty is sacrificed to achieve a nebulous ecological outcome. This is the principle concern of the "conservative ecologist" who values individual liberty above all other values, to include ecological ones.

An Alternative to Globally Centralized Environmental Authority

In speaking of climate change, the renowned American economist Elinor Ostrom observed that (Ostrom, 2009, p. 5)

> "The classic theory of collective action predicts that no one will change behavior and reduce their energy use unless an external authority imposes enforceable rules that change the incentives faced by those involved. This is why many analysts call for a change in institutions at the global level."

Unlike many of her environmental and ecological contemporaries, Ostrom resists immediately accepting the imperative to adopt global governance in response to the "social dilemma" of climate change. Ostrom suggested that "social dilemmas" such as climate change "involve a conflict between individual rationality and optimal outcomes for a group" (Ostrom, 2009, p. 6). Such an observation helps explain the inevitable tension between simultaneously realizing individual liberty and environmental sustainability. Ostrom and her colleagues document a prevailing pessimism among many environmental economists regarding the capacity of individuals and communities to overcome their conflicting interests to deal with significant environmental threats.

Concerned as to whether this prevailing pessimism is ill-conceived, she and her colleagues researched the assumption that competing individual interests would thwart effective collective action and concluded that the pessimism of many researchers and policymakers was ill founded. Instead, Ostrom suggested that meaningful collective action to deal with significant environmental threats such as climate change could fruitfully occur under the following conditions – namely when: (Ostrom, 2009, p. 12)

1. "Many of those affected have agreed on the need to changes in behavior and see themselves as jointly sharing responsibility for future outcomes.
2. The reliability and frequency of information about the phenomena of concern is relatively high.
3. Participants know who else has agreed to change behavior and that their conformance is being monitored.
4. Communication occurs among at least subsets of participants."

Ostrom bolstered her conclusions by documenting instances where climate change was being actively dealt with locally rather than globally. She questioned the penchant of policymakers to solve global environmental problems at the level of large organizations and institutions or through central planning and management and instead called for the amelioration of environmental problems at the local level. In so doing she noted that "contemporary assignments of regional, national, or international governments with the *exclusive* responsibility for providing local public goods and common-pool resources removes authority from local officials and citizens to solve local problems that differ from one location to another" (Ostrom, 2009, p. 22).

Ostrom's research challenges Garrett Hardin's "tragedy of the commons" (Hardin, 1968) and proffers a "bottom-up" paradigm for shared economic prosperity assuming that the community develops the necessary institutions and means of communication to sustainably support such efforts. In this regard her work is encouraging, especially in light of the proclivities of many of her environmental and ecological colleagues to pursue centralist, collectivist and global solutions to environmental and economic problems. Ostrom's ideas are intrinsically democratic as when she suggests that "increasing the authority of individuals to devise their own rules may well result in processes that allow social norms to evolve and thereby increase the probability of individuals better solving collective action problems" (Ostrom, 2000, p. 154). However, her ideas are by no means mainstream and await adoption to a degree that would significantly allay the fears of those concerned about surrendering personal and economic liberty in the interest of accomplishing centralized environmental sustainability.

The "Conservative Ecologist"

Ostrom's ideas regarding the influence of human values, including those relating to nature that lie beyond quantifiable market statistics and which influence market behavior, are not entirely new. Such recognition can also be found in Ludwig von Mises *Human Action* (1949) and Jared Diamond's *Collapse* (2004). While her ideas do much to elucidate the contexts within which individuals and communities make economic choices, they have yet to displace the philosophies of those of a libertarian and free-market orientation who both value the environment *and* value the benefits to be derived through the relatively unfettered operation of capitalism. Such persons can be characterized as "conservative ecologists" for whom sustaining natural environments is of predominant concern providing that achieving that end is not realized by any significant diminution of individual liberty and economic discretion.

In all likelihood the idea of the "conservative ecologist" typifies the environmental philosophy of countless Americans – as demonstrated by the Congressional elections of 2010. Such a person is popularly construed as being "conservative" by comparison to modern progressive ideas in which label "liberal" has been co-opted to disguise their comparatively socialistic values. In truth, the conservative ecologist is in fact classically liberal to the degree that Individual liberty within a democratic society constitutes the *sine qua non* among all human values. For such an individual, a sustainable natural environment that is achieved by means of a social ecology bereft of freedom and individual discretion is a *Pyrrhic* achievement. Influenced as it is by the ideas of Karl Marx, globally oriented collectivist approaches to realizing environmental sustainability appear to assume that human nature is essential selfish and greedy (Marx, 1867). Consequently capitalism grounded in the "selfish" desires of individuals invariably produce a social Darwinian capitalistic elite who rise to power by being more aggressively selfish than virtually everyone else, and these elite inevitably act in ways that are politically, socially, economically and ecologically destructive.

Although Marx ultimately separated himself from his religious roots (Marx, 1844), his perception of human nature bears remarkable resemblance to the "sinful" human nature portrayed in Talmudic, and Old Testament Biblical accounts. From a "*salvific* "perspective the original sin of human beings is greed, the embodiment of greed entails possessions, and redemption from this sin demands an equitable redistribution of all possessions and a commitment to living with as few "things" as possible. This "Marxist" approach to socio-political and economic salvation happens to also be the dominant environmental perspective regarding ecological sustainability. Comparatively speaking, just as Marxism was antagonistic toward religion of any kind so has modern environmentalism become hostile to individualism and the expression of individual preferences via free market exercise.

Substituting Eco-Centrism for Anthropocentrism

Modern environmentalism has philosophically and practically substituted an emphasis upon the viability of the ecosystem over that of the individual. The rationale supporting this approach is at face value logical – namely that if there is no functionally sustainable ecosystem there will ultimately be no more human communities and societies. Since the fate of humanity and the world's ecosystems are inextricably intertwined, the fate of one dictates that of the other.

In this ecological formulation the concept of the "collective" is expanded beyond what Marx conceived to include the multitude of ecosystems within the world and their inhabitants (Gladwin, 1995). Consequently whereas Marxism relates to the "collective" as a group of citizens or individuals, an "eco-centric" ecological orientation construes the "collective" as entailing all things and entities. This eco-centric approach redefines the threat of individuals and their preferences upon the ecosystem as constituting a dangerous "anthropocentrism" that must ultimately give way to an "other-centrism" in which the "other" is the entirety of the planet with all of its constituent ecosystems, objects and entities. When the collective is expanded to include the planet itself, as James Lovelock has done with his Gaia theory, then we can speak of a global collective who by virtue of its scope justifies the need for global governance – i.e. planetary management.

Concomitant to the environmentalist adoption of such an anti-capitalist Marxist perspective is the conviction that individual and anthropocentric ecological perspectives must be replaced with bio-centric and eco-centric values. The elevation of eco-centrism over anthropocentrism is undoubtedly the most enduring legacy of Aldo Leopold's famous "Land Ethic" (Norton, 2005; Leopold, 1948). Accordingly, eco-centrism must ultimately supplant anthropocentrism as the dominant personal, social, cultural, economic and ecological ethic. This interpretation of Leopold's philosophy is central to the environmental vision of modern environmentalist. It is, however, antithetical to the values and interests of the conservative ecologist. Anthropocentrism is blamed for every instance of excess and irresponsible action. In this way, the collective ecological community (not simply the human community) is prioritized and valued above and beyond the values, actions and aspirations of human beings and especially individual human beings.

A Pragmatic Approach

As a theoretical exercise Leopold's advice is sound and worthy of consideration. However, from a pragmatic perspective, it fails precisely because human beings are necessarily anthropocentric in their orientation toward the world. This observation stands at the heart of my own work on "nested ecology" (Wimberley, 2009) where I assert that individual human beings of necessity relate to the world around them by way of their human senses, families, societies, culture and economies. This anthropocentric perspective is unavoidable and is fully consistent with the manner in which every other living creature on the planet relates to the environs surrounding them.

Asking people to *not* be anthropocentric in their interactions or deriding them when they do so is not merely a matter of impracticality: it is an assault upon humanity itself. Taken to the extreme, Leopold's land ethic implies that human welfare is of less consequence and importance than that of the larger ecological community on Earth. Thus a binomial "either-or" scenario is established in which there are winners and losers and where the ecological community can only "win" if the human community on Earth comparatively "loses" something or "loses itself."

Subordinating to the Global Collective

Those who fear or resent socio-economic systems and approaches that promote the freedom of individual interests all too frequently advocate for more state control along the lines proposed by Robert Bellamy Foster (2009a; 200b; 2009c). They rationalize their encroachment into the rights and prerogatives of individuals by arguing that we face an ill-defined "ecological crisis" which justifies and necessitates the abrogation of individual rights and their subsequent incorporation into the apparatus of the state to vouchsafe the interests of the collective over the more narrow and selfish interests of individuals. Even so, the underlying logic of this rationalization is the destruction of the free market as an avenue for the expression of individual preferences.

This approach can be readily observed throughout Europe, within the federal policies of the United States, as well as within the environmental policies emanating from the United Nations and its Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). Assuming these trends continue, the inevitable result appears to be a dramatic growth in state, federal and international control and regulation of not only economies but inevitably of individual lifestyles – all in the name of protecting us and the planet from one ill-defined catastrophic ecological crisis after another. The realization of such a political economy is precisely what influential environmental activists such as Arne Naess (1989) and George Sessions (1995) advocate and espouse. The compelling question that continually emerges throughout this contemporary ideological and ecological struggle for economic and political dominance is whether or not collective, state control is preferable to the action of individuals functioning within free markets when it comes to improving environmental health and sustainability.

Free Markets

Our perspective is that free-markets can and should be utilized as the principle tool for realizing ecological improvement. In this regard we constitute a minority within the ecological / environmental community where post-capitalistic expansionist, regulatory, and "command and control" philosophies and attitudes toward "managing" the environment dominate. Those of us advocating a free market approach to environmentalism legitimately fear the power and influence of those who would act on behalf of the collective society and nature. We fear that the purported ecological value of protecting the environment can conceivably be far exceeded by the negative influence upon individual liberty, choice and initiative. Free market environmentalists value the individual and recognize that ultimately – regardless of what political or environmental philosophy or policies exist – individuals will ultimately interact as individuals not as collectives, and they will express their preferences as they are best able. This is the essence of the conservative ecologist's philosophy of "necessary anthropocentrism."

Necessary Anthropocentrism and Trade

Constrained as we are to perceive the world through the lenses of our human senses and to interact with nature and one another by way of the tools, constructs, ideas and systems we have created, it is of vital importance to recognize and appreciate the centrality of trade or market exchanges as a vehicle for human sustenance, self-realization and self-actualization. Indeed, trade is a central feature of the social ecology of humans. The historical record is replete with the evidence and narratives of human trade and its influence upon human ideas, society, government, art, philosophy and ethics (Pomeranz and Topik, 2000). Trade and exchange is simply what contemporary humans do. Arguably, free trade and exchange have been responsible for lifting countless human beings beyond the realm of meager self-sufficiency. Free trade and exchange has resulted not only in higher aggregate standards of living and immense social, cultural, occupational and economic specialization they have also improved the health and socio-cultural

welfare for all who have been given the opportunity to express their preferences within the context of market exchanges.

Asking contemporary people to refrain from expressing their preferences within relatively free and unfettered markets – i.e. abrogating their rights and investing them in the state to achieve a supposed ecological outcome - is a denial of the necessary anthropocentrism of human beings and is a dehumanizing expectation. Human beings don't "merely" trade and exchange, they "desire" trade and exchange, they "want" to trade and exchange. Ultimately, to realize their full human potential in this contemporary world, humans *must* engage in trade and the exchange of goods and services. Nobody is exempt from this requirement.

Trade and exchange allows for the widespread transformation of natural resources into goods and products, and the valuing associated with these products has been a central activity of human interaction for as long as human history can be recounted and reconstructed. Ecologically speaking, compelling human beings to forgo free exchange is to detract from the net humanity of each and every human being as well as to diminish the vigor and resilience of human communities more broadly defined. In a word, it is an "inhuman" act precisely because it ignores and denies the fact that human beings are of necessity anthropocentric in their orientation and free market trade is a central way in which they express and realize their "necessarily anthropocentric selves."

Post-Capitalism and Environmentalism

Environmental essayist Curtis White expresses the prevailing sentiments of the modern environmental movement regarding capitalism and environmentalism as clearly as anyone, characterizing capitalism "as a system of ever-accelerating production and consumption" [which] we environmentalists continually insist, [is] not sustainable." Moreover White claims "it is a system intent on its own death" (White, 2007). The crux of White's critique of capitalism is the individual capitalist him/herself who seemingly lacks any moral compass beyond their immediate gratification. White projects an exceedingly dour view of human nature observing that,

> "the capitalist will stoically look destruction in the face before he will stop what he's doing, especially if he believes that it is somebody else whose destruction is in question. Unlike most of the people living under him, the capitalist is a great risk-taker largely because he believes that his wealth insulates him from the consequences of risks gone bad. Ever the optimistic gambler with other people's money, the capitalist is willing to wager that, while there may be costs to pay, he won't have to pay them. Animals, plants, impoverished people near and far may have to pay, but he bets that he won't. If called upon to defend his actions, he will of course argue that he has a constitutionally protected right to property and the pursuit of his own happiness. This is his "freedom." At that point, we have the unfortunate habit of shutting up when we ought to reply, "Yes, but yours is a freedom without conscience" (White, 2007).

It is the morally bereft character of this market player that justifies in the minds of environmentalists like White the application of a radically different approach to the human/environmental relationship – one that requires that consumers and capitalists be protected from themselves by the state on behalf of the collective good – where the collective includes nature. The ethical foundations for this alternative philosophy are well grounded in virtually every branch of the academy – a philosophy which can generally be subsumed under the rubric of "social justice" – particularly as the term has come to have been defined by the work of ethicist John Rawls (2001, 1996; 1971).

Rawls defines social justice as "the capacity to understand, to apply, and to act from the public conception of justice which characterizes the fair terms of cooperation" among members of society" and to do so with "a willingness...to act in relation to others on terms that they also

can publicly endorse" (Rawls, 1996, p. 19). Rawls then identifies two essential principles of justice, the first of which involves "equal liberty" and the second the values of "equal opportunity" and the "difference principle"- meaning that society may require efforts on behalf of the public that involves awarding some persons greater power, status, income or wealth than others. These two principles read as follows:

> "I. Each person has an equal right to a fully adequate scheme of equal basic liberties which is compatible with a similar scheme of liberties for all,
>
> II. Social and economic inequalities are to satisfy two conditions. First, they must be attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity; and second, they must be to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged members of society" (Rawls, 1996, p. 291).

Considered together, these principles, particularly the "difference principle," have been used as a rationale for redistributing resources from one group to another in the interest of improving the conditions of one group by comparatively reducing the freedom, resources, authority, or rights of others. This philosophy that is consistent with socialistic redistributive principles is widely accepted among contemporary environmentalists as exemplified by the eco-justice orientation of Brazilian eco-theologian and activist Leonardo Boff (1997). By comparison, proponents of free market capitalism are portrayed as ill-informed, self-indulgent, greedy, indifferent to the needs of others, and insensitive to the needs and demands of the natural environment. Theirs' is seemingly a morally bankrupt philosophy of immediate gratification - the interests of the collective and the environment *be-damned*.

Yet despite the seeming consensus within the activist environmental community regarding imposing a "just" socialistic/collectivist/redistributive approach to managing economic resource on behalf of the environment, the political and economic world has yet to witness a single instance in which such approaches to managing economic resources have substantially improved upon the working of comparatively unregulated free markets over the long haul. Planned and command and control economies have proved unsustainable and have largely failed to consistently deliver on their promises to the public or to the environment (Stanislaw & Yergin, 2002). Comparatively, free societies have largely remained productive, affluent, free and environmentally responsive thanks to the ability of citizens to readily express their preferences and pursue their lives within the bounds of comparatively free (though regulated) markets. While Communist and socialists economies throughout Europe, Asia and South America have failed, nations pursuing comparatively capitalistic approaches have by and large prospered and in so doing have used a significant proportion of their economic and political resources to regulate and improve upon natural environments (Anderson, 2004; Hollander, 2003; Stanislaw and Yergin, 2002; Grossman and Krueger, 1995).

Nevertheless, some have speculated whether capitalism can ever truly be "green." Curtis White is pessimistic on this issue. According to White,

> "I don't believe that capitalism can become green, simply because the imperatives of environmentalism are not part of its way of reasoning. Capitalism can think profit but it can't think nature. It's not in its nature to think nature" (White, 2007)

White is not alone in his pessimism. Berklee College political scientist Victor Wallis recently observed what he perceives to be inherent contradictions between the two worldviews:

> "To be green means to prioritize the health of the ecosphere, with all that this entails in terms of curbing greenhouse gases and preserving biodiversity. To promote capitalism,

> by contrast, is to foster growth and accumulation, treating both the workforce and the natural environment as mere inputs" (Wallis, 2010).

A System of Natural Liberty

Free market approaches to environmentalism seek to be "capitalistic" and "green" by imbuing their ecological philosophies with the values of democracy, justice and natural rights inherent within the earliest formulations of market capitalism. In particular, such market environmentalism presupposes a natural empathy among humans for one another and arguably in relation to the natural environment. Adam Smith addressed this phenomenon in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1772) when he observed that:

> "How selfish soever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortune of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it, except the pleasure of seeing it." (Smith, 1772, I.1.9)

This understanding of human empathy was further developed by Adam Smith in *Wealth of Nations* into a concept known as the "system of natural liberty." According to this principle

> "Every individual is continually exerting himself to find out the most advantageous employment for whatever capital he can command. It is his own advantage, indeed, and not that of the society, which he has in view. But the study of his own advantage naturally, or rather necessarily, leads him to prefer that employment which is most advantageous to the society" (Smith, 1776, IV.2.4).

The "system of natural liberty" operates upon the assumption that human beings are inherently and naturally "free" and when individuals act upon that freedom to maximize and ultimately realize their personal market advantage that, they will inevitably and "naturally" conclude to prefer exercising their advantages in the ways that are most appreciated and rewarded by the society. In this way what becomes most advantageous for individuals are those things that the society also considers most advantageous in their regard. Accordingly,

> "All systems either of preference or of restriction, therefore, being thus completely taken away, the obvious and simple system of natural liberty establishes itself of its own accord. Every man, as long as he does not violate the laws of justice, is left perfectly free to pursue his own interests his own way and to bring both his industry and capital into competition with those of other men" (Smith, 1776, IV.9.51).

This is of course, the central argument of some of the most noted among the free-market economists – people such as Ludwig von Mises (1949), Friedrich von Hayek (1944), W. H. Hutt (1933), Milton Friedman (1982) and others. Indeed Von Hayek's *Road to Serfdom* is a sober reminder of what happens when free-markets turn their backs upon Smith's "natural liberties" and market initiative and discretion is replaced with state-run economics.

The blatant failures of state socialism as illustrated within Stanislaw and Yergin's *The Commanding Heights* (2002) are seemingly ignored by modern environmentalists and the ramifications for the return to state socialism are similarly minimized or ignored. Socialism is in fact warmly embraced. For instance Barry Commoner, an early founder of the environmental movement in America has asserted that the "origin of the environmental crisis can be traced back to the capitalist precept that the choice of production technology is to be governed solely by private interests in profit maximization." Commoner refutes such notions and instead offers a

socialist solution insisting that environmental quality can be achieved only by "implement[ing] the social governance of production" (Commoner, 1971, p. 219).

No Perfect Economic System

Sadly no system or philosophy is perfect. As market capitalism can become socially disruptive of employment and wages during periods of economic downturn, so can socialistic approaches serve to blunt affluence, perpetuate inefficiency, undercut individual initiative and freedom, politicize public concerns and issues and ultimately fail to relate to ecological issues in a timely and effective fashion. Every system possesses its own unique drawbacks. However among the options currently available, the one that has proved to be the most stable, sustainable, productive and democratic is that of market capitalism.

In fact, despite the current difficulties confronting the economies of the world, the historically dramatic failures of command and control and socialistic economic approaches not only in Europe and Asia but also throughout the Caribbean and South America and the notable failures of softer approaches to socialism in the United Kingdom and across Europe, render any serious assertion of the superiority of planned over free market economies disingenuous, irresponsible and frankly dangerous. That contemporary environmentalists would consistently advocate for such approaches to be employed in the interest of protecting the planet from anthropogenic despoliation is a measure of their collective ecological, historical and economic illiteracy, arrogance, and intellectual elitism. It is also a testament to the triumph of ideology over ideas, passion over judgment, and politics over purpose.

Such a philosophy advocates for the improvement of natural ecological resources by devolving human ecologies. At issue is whether this cure for the planet's environmental woes is far- or short- sighted. Operating from within the comfortable standard-of-living modern capitalism these critics of human initiative engage in a rarified level of arrogance and self-indulgence that in all likelihood would be unsustainable within less stable and affluent societies.

Free Market Environmentalism

In Garret Hardin's "tragedy of the commons" (1968) natural resources are communally owned and are inevitably degraded as a consequence of public pressure on limited resources. Ostrom's work not only challenges the assumption that environmental resources must be centrally and even globally managed but also challenges the assumption that natural resources held in common by the public cannot be effectively and efficiently managed. Unfortunately, the public record, particularly in regard to mismanagement of the nation's forest land (Huggard & Gomez, 2001), dampens Ostrom's optimism and fuels the conviction of free market environmentalists who argue that natural resources are almost always most efficiently employed when private individuals and interest have an ownership stake in them.

Many of us involved in studying environmental issues and challenges respond to the dominant environmentalist ecological philosophy with a resounding – No! Not only is it possible to address the thorniest of the planet's environmental problems through the application of free market economic principles and practices, ultimately, it is the only effective way to "sustainably" do so. Without doubt, human activities pose a significant threat to the world's environs to include water and air pollution, overgrazing of grasslands, clear-cutting of forests, wasteful energy use and more. There is much room for improvement at many levels. However, on any given day, those factors most responsible for human environmental degradation can be linked to three principle causes – disease, war, and poverty – that can in turn be linked to a lack of individual liberty, economic scarcity and inefficiency.

Simply put people who are sick, poor, embattled and oppressed make exceedingly poor environmentalists. Maslow (1943) observed this reality long ago asserting that people who can't

get their basic needs met on a predictable basis are incapable of realizing higher level goals and environmental protection and sustainability are precisely the type of goals that are consistently forgone. As commentator Melissa Clouther has observed (2008) "Environmentalism is the luxury of those without more pressing concerns — like survival." Clouther is not alone in her analysis either. Ifeanyi C. Ezeonu (2004) observes that "environmentalism [is] a luxury which only the rich industrialised nations of the North can afford" (p. 34). This perspective, commonly characterized as "Being too poor to be green" (Martinez-Alier, 1995) reflects the underlying belief "that the poor, though they desire a high quality environment, are unwilling to give up income to protect the environment. Only at higher incomes do they have the economic resources to divert to environmental causes" (Bruneau & Echevarria, 2009, p.2)

Despite the misgivings of environmentalists like Barry Commoner, Curtis White and Victor Wallis regarding the utility of free market approaches to environmental issues, pertinent research on the topic is encouraging. Research findings consistently demonstrate that although families with comparatively low per capita incomes tend to perceive environmental quality as marginally unaffordable, perceptions dramatically change as families become increasingly affluent, to the point where concerns over environmental quality ultimately becomes prominent (Yandle, Bhattari, & Vijayaraghavan, 2004).

Free market environmentalism assumes that as families and individuals become increasingly affluent they tend to increasingly value environmental quality. Affluence renders the individual more available in terms of time and resources to not only appreciate the need for environmental health and sustainability, but to channel their time and resources toward promoting these ends. Moreover, free market environmentalism recognizes and utilizes individual incentives and property rights to improve and sustain environmental resources. Likewise, free market environmentalism employs Smith's concept of the market as a "system of natural liberty" where the advantage to the individual produces a complimentary advantage in the society and the environment.

Rising affluence brings with it social stability, increased education levels, increased leisure time, a reduced birth-rate, economic stability and predictability, and consensual government. These characteristics promote a stable and sustainable "social ecology" among human beings which inevitably produces a reduced human threat to other ecosystems. The ultimate social ecological goal is to enhance the quality of the overall social ecology in the interest of creating the social and economic conditions requisite for individuals and societies to creatively and successfully grapple with pressing environmental problems and cooperatively seek their sustainable resolution.

How Much Freedom Need we Sacrifice to Achieve What Kind of Ecological Outcome?

Despite their positive attributes, free markets produce economic losses as well as rewards. Market upturns generate wealth and well-being for a burgeoning number of people, but downturns also create unemployment, bankruptcies, and countless other ills. Likewise market exchanges are always subject to the excesses of greed and malfeasance. It is for this reason that government will always have an important role to play. The question is not whether government shall be involved in the economic affairs of a society but rather in what form and to what degree they will be involved.

For free market enthusiasts the role of government is minimum – involving the certification of property rights, the lawful, orderly and predictable functioning of markets, the provision and maintenance of a system of currency and credit, insuring the accuracy of information in transactions and guaranteeing that the market remains free of graft and extortion. Socialists and Marxists, on the other hand, contend that if markets are not carefully managed and administered on behalf of the public (the collective) by a strong central government then they will ultimately

cater to the desires of the elite at the expense of the disenfranchised and poor thereby inextricably driving the society into moral, social, economic and ecological bankruptcy.

Confronted with this conundrum between individual liberty and socio-economic, political and ecological sustainability, one overarching question ultimately emerges: *How much freedom need we sacrifice to achieve what kind of ecological outcome?* If we believe, as we have been assured by many within the environmental community, that our way of living is certainly going to bring about an ecological catastrophe born of climate, water and soil then there may be great justification for surrendering a substantial amount of individual freedom and liberty in the interest of saving our planet and ourselves. However, if the degree of ecological despoliation that we are confronted with is to a much smaller degree than we have heretofore been led to believe, then there may be much less of a justification for surrendering a great deal of human freedom and liberty.

Of course this scenario presumes that the human community is confronted with some degree of ecological threat which in turn motivates changes in political-economies. Alternately, humans may also be motivated out of a genuine concern for the environment and may choose to voluntarily make changes in their means and modes of consumption and commerce based upon their better human instincts and their sincere appreciation of natural environs – if not on the basis of pure self-interest and self-preservation. The conservative ecologist's prevailing commitment to free individuals and democratic societies unfailingly results in an ecological orientation that builds upon the finest and most noble characteristics of human beings and consistently seeks to promote ecological health and sustainability by producing stable, meaningful and sustainable families, communities and nations, which is to say by promoting sustainable social ecologies. To that end these ecologies must honor the need for individuals and societies to be free and to relate to one another in a democratic fashion, as well as to be free to express their preferences within the market in a free and unfettered way. Based upon the values of the conservative ecologist, a sustainable natural environment is of little human value unless it can be realized in a way that leaves humans and human community at liberty to interact in their natural state of freedom.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Edward T. Wimberley : Dr. Wimberley is a professor of ecological studies at Florida Gulf Coast University (FGCU) having served as the founding Dean of the College of Professional Studies and the College of Education. Dr. Wimberley has published extensively and diversely in the social sciences, to include work in psychiatry, health care, health policy, social work, environmental policy, environmental philosophy and ethics and theology and ecology. He is the author of more than 30 articles in professional journals, and the author of two books, including an upcoming text on ecological philosophy. Dr. Wimberley holds a Ph.D. in public affairs from the University of Pittsburgh, as well as a Master of Social Work from Pitt, and is an ordained Presbyterian minister, educated in theology at the Pittsburgh Theological Seminary where he graduated magna cum laude with a Master of Divinity degree. Dr. Wimberley is a native of Florida who was born in St. Augustine and educated at Stetson University in Deland, Florida, where he earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in psychology.

Bradley Hobbs: Bradley K. Hobbs is a university professor who developed an appreciation for both morality and profits through his experience as the child of a successful, small business entrepreneur. He has always been deeply curious about how to help make the world a better place. He has, somewhat begrudgingly, become convinced that capitalism is the only social arrangement consistent with human flourishing. He resides in the U.S. but considers himself a citizen of mankind.