

Review of *Green Politics and Neo-Liberalism*

by Dave Toke (Macmillan Press, 2000)

The world foremost superpower, the USA, has been run for several years now by a clique of neo-liberals fronted by the figurehead of Mr. George Bush. They are ideological warriors, convinced that government policy should be devoted to deregulation and freedom of enterprise. Around the world the forces of neo-liberalism have been in the ascendant. Unlike traditional conservatism, neo-liberalism sees no need to conserve and protect. The invisible hand of unregulated competition will steer the world to peace, prosperity and personal liberty.

At the same time, an increasing number of people reject this vision. This movement takes many forms, from direct action against new roads and demonstrations against the World Trade Organisation to consumer boycotts. 'Green politics' is a fair description of this movement which fights in the name of environmental protection, human rights, devolution, animal welfare, peace, anti-globalisation and so forth, issues on which Mr. Bush and his ilk invariably are found on the other side of the barricades.

Toke's analysis is somewhat academic. He makes much of his choice of methodologies in tackling his subject. He particularly addresses issues through theories (rational choice theory etc.) as framed by fellow academics, resulting in a very formalistic approach. Some of the writing is also rather turgid (he states that "Rachel Carson's ideas...have still not achieved discursive dominance among the majority of the world's states" while, later, he asks; "Has Haas exaggerated the dominance of epistemic communities over environmental policy?").

Those engaged in struggle against the whole 'development' juggernaut may not find much material of direct use. Symptomatically, the book opens with a discussion of other writers on discourse theory and especially the work of Michel Foucault, with which it is assumed that readers are conversant. On offer is a useful summary of how certain theories of knowledge and power relations might shed light on how, for example the debate about road building programme is framed. Not on offer are arguments and evidence which the reader could use to persuade non-converts that transport policy over the past decades has been sheer madness.

Indeed, Toke is so wrapped in discussing how issues are discussed that he sometimes loses sight of the issues themselves. In the case of his discussion of the road programme, one gets little sense of the on-going strength of pro-car forces (witness the recent fuel tax protests, on-going expansion of air transport or the renewed surge of road-building under New Labour, with more roads built than under its Conservative predecessors). Instead, he suggests that "support for the dominant 'road-building' discourse is weakening...(leading) politicians to choose new policy options". If only!

'Rational choice theory' is given a whole chapter to itself. Toke singles out Garrett Hardin's thesis of the 'tragedy of the commons' as a classical version of this theory. The discussion is certainly useful, though Toke does not recognise that his subjects have broadened their original arguments. Hardin has written much more since his famous essay of 1968 while William Ophuls, whose work best extends Hardin's insights, is only cited for an older essay, not the two excellent full-scale books he has authored (*Ecology and the Politics of Scarcity*, revised edition 1992, and *Requiem for Modern Politics*, 1997).

A chapter on the politics of science follows. Toke makes passing reference to the debate between Paul Ehrlich and Barry Commoner on the pressures responsible for ecological decline but then drops it. Yet it is absolutely central to any understanding of why the Earth is in such an increasingly parlous condition. (Later, p175, he seems to endorse Commoner, though Ehrlich well and truly flattened Commoner's theory of 'flawed technology'). Here and elsewhere, the feeling is created by the book is driven more by what concerns academics than by the intrinsic importance of certain ideas (in this case 'impact analysis' and its cousin 'footprints analysis' which is not even mentioned).

Toke produces interesting material on the role of scientific experts in issues such as whaling and CFCs. However, his predilection for discourse analysis methodology has become a straightjacket by now. His discussion about 'epistemic communities' sheds little light on why fish stocks or forests are exploited to the point of ruination. Though earlier in the book he makes reference to

capitalism, it is not linked to the matters in this chapter. The fact of the matter is that capitalist organisations can walk away from the wreckage they create (mobile capital can simply be reinvested in new avenues of exploitation).

Now it would be crude to reduce everything to economic explanations. Values and worldviews clearly count since wild species have been wiped out by both capitalist and non-capitalist societies alike. There is a rich literature by writers such as Arne Naess, Bill Devall, George Sessions, John Livingston and Neil Everndon about what might be called 'resourcism', the treatment of both nature as a whole and individual creatures as nothing but resources there to satisfy open-ended and indiscriminate human wants. Their work on why the planet is being plundered to death is a vital source of illumination but Toke seems more interested in categorising arguments than shedding light per se .

That said, he does say some useful and necessary things how environmental groups use (and misuse) scientific data. Indeed, the problem goes deeper since many people in the green movement, especially its 'new age' wings, have fallen prey to the crude relativism so sharply dissected in Sokal and Bricmont's *Intellectual Impostures*. There is a deep anti-rationalism which, for example, rejects the inheritance of Enlightenment lock, stock and barrel, even blaming it for enormities such as the Holocaust and the Bomb. It is certainly to regain a sense of balance — we need hard heads and kind hearts.

Only in Chapter 4 does any serious discussion of neo-liberalism begin. Toke says he wants to explore how "green politics (can) provide an alternative to this discourse (of neo-liberalism)". He might help by showing how the latter is in theory riddled with contradictions (e.g. how competition tends to destroy competition) and is in practice a disaster. Sadly, he does not really do justice to the nature of neo-liberalism, the identity and motives of its adherents, nor to its ruinous impact on society and environment. One yearns for a forceful polemic, backed up by hard evidence from, say, the Chilean free market 'experiment' or the equally disastrous market 'reforms' in Eastern Europe.

His discussion of inequality is also somewhat tame. Contrast it with the real world of privatisation scams, 'private finance' swindles, and gambling with other peoples' livelihoods on the stock exchanges. At times, he is somewhat naive. He writes, for example, of the social solidarity engendered in World War 11. There is some truth in this. Yet one should not forget that, in 1939, the upper classes could not get out of Britain fast enough, nor that services like the RAF were riddled with class snobbery and discrimination against working class pilots (even to the point of separate barracks). During the Blitz, the people of East London sought greater safety by forcing their way into the Underground tube system *against* the wishes of the authorities. There was a gigantic crime wave in the big cities — not much solidarity there.

Only when he discusses why so many people remain loyal to the system does the book come to life. He rightly recognises that there is widespread resistance to green ideas. He concentrates on the broad middle classes whom he sees as driven by individualistic and materialistic desires. He cites popular support for tax-cutting governments (or, more precisely, parties who promise to cut taxes). Campaigns against the spread of 'second homes', which, in some rural areas, have driven out the locals, are clearly going to be more difficult when, as recently revealed, 1 million Britons now own such properties. He argues that the way forward is to redefine self-interest and show people that, to put it crudely, they will do themselves good by going green.

He then looks at broader dimensions of green politics. Here, his use of terms like 'development' is rather loose. Certainly he does not address the biophysical arguments developed by economists like Georgescu-Roegen about the impossibility of on-going economic growth, no matter how defined. Nor does he do justice to the moral and intellectual current he calls 'Ecocentrism'. He argues for an enlightened anthropocentrism. However, in practice, this will lead to the sacrifice of yet one more bit of non-human nature whenever human interests - and not even essential ones - are at stake. Studies like David Ehrenfeld's *The Arrogance of Humanism* have exposed the limits of the human-centred environmentalism that Toke supports.

His charge that Greens have failed to address purely social concerns seems unfair. All the grand statements of green politics in the early 60s and early 70s such as *How to be a Survivor* and *The Blueprint for Survival* had big sections on social issues. A look at the first ten years' issues of *The Ecologist* will unearth numerous articles on education, crime, unemployment, and war as well as the expected ones on nuclear power and so forth.

More recently, the bioregional movement has sketched out visions of new communities 'reinhabiting' the land, where people live in greater peace with each other as well as with the rest of nature. The bibliography does cite Herman Daly but no mention is made of the fact that Daly was quite explicit that a steady-state economy must contain strong policies regarding inequality between people. Other recent works, not least the writings of Ted Trainer (*Abandon Affluence, The Conserver Society* etc.) clearly link the crisis "without" (ecological unsustainability) and the crisis "within" (assorted symptoms of economic, political and social dis-ease and instability). Richard Douthwaite's *The Growth Illusion* roundly condemns conventional policies on all grounds, not just environmental ones.

The next chapter on Health and Materialism is, I feel, the strongest in the book. Though there is an older literature which he tends to ignore (writers such as Boyden and Powles, some of whose work was made available by *The Ecologist*), Toke does a useful job by citing research from the late 1990s. He also says a lot of sensible things about increasing pressure at work and its toll in stress-related illnesses and sheer unhappiness. The ensuing discussion of performance-related pay is also rewarding.

The final chapters look at how to build an alternative to neo-liberalism. As Toke rightly notes, the temptation to romanticise the 'underclasses' and to see them as the base for social change is one to be strongly resisted, however much sympathy their plight deserves. Historical periods when there were far fewer affluent citizens and when no 'culture of contentment' existed did not necessarily produce more militant protest. Socialist authors like Robert Tressell at the start of the twentieth century bemoaned the number of 'ragged trousered philanthropists', poor people who loyally supported the system that made them poor.

He particularly looks at the French writer Andre Gorz with particular reference to the place of people in the production process and to the impact of new technology. Toke seems unduly optimistic about computer technology and the Internet. No mention is made of the resource consumption and pollution associated with the manufacture, use and disposal of related equipment — the water pollution around 'chip' manufacturing plants, the power blackouts in California (which, in part, have been connected to computer use), and the burgeoning mountain of 'silicon trash' awaiting disposal. Nor does Toke deal with restructuring of knowledge and the promotion of a culture of disconnected and even more consumerist individualism also central to cyberspace. Here, critics such as Chet Bowers (*Let Them Eat Data* etc.) are better guides.

On the other hand, Toke, following Schumacher, is right to support the development of a new work ethic, as opposed to the right to idleness some advocate (Bertrand Russell was an early advocate of this silly idea). He cites some interesting case studies about 'job enrichment', greater democracy in the workplace and a more general 'downshifting' in lifestyles. Sadly, there are more signs of a return to intensive consumerism, sometimes called the 'pleasure revenge', i.e. a revolt against healthier and more socially responsible lifestyles. Even fur is making a comeback in the fashion world.

In the final straight, Toke starts off by quoting Fukuyama, a widely cited defender of neo-liberalism. Such 'thinkers' argue that we live the best of all possible worlds, a system in which any negative features duly get ironed out. It might have been more useful if he had launched a straight attack on these ideologues (which of course include the likes of Julian Simon). However, there is no such engagement and instead we are taken on a rather unwieldy discussion of epistemology, ontology and 'species realism'.

The ensuing discussion of Postmodernism is rather unsatisfactory. Its main threat is the attempt to deny any objective reality to nature and to treat it as but a subjective construction. In turn, it becomes something that, if subjective preferences dictate, could and should be reconstructed in whatever way we want (see writers such as Andrew Ross, William Cronon and, worse, Donna Haraway).

To his credit, Toke points out the silliness of thinking that Greens are anti-technology. However, he misses the heart of the matter. It is that certain technologies have intrinsic qualities and bring out about certain impacts, regardless of their ownership or the uses to which they are deployed. Furthermore, 'technofixes' (technologically derived solutions) often make matters worse, not least because of unanticipated side-effects). In any case the real problem is often social and not technical in nature. He rightly tries to put modern technology in a broader context. After all, the simple axe and the basic plough probably have done more to change the face of the Earth than

most of today's supertechnologies. That said, we should underestimate the fatal steps being taken with genetic engineering, a development of which Toke makes only slight passing references.

Toke concludes by advocating what he calls a social green approach. In my lengthy experience of the movement, social environmentalism always seems to mean more social and less green. The American writer Mark Downie, for example, revealingly calls wilderness preservation "a worthy...but overemphasised value". The English Green Party has spent so much time on travellers' rights and drugs policy that the Liberal Democrat party now has a bigger policy portfolio on environmental matters. To some extent, the green movement has become a coalition of assorted grievance groups, with a corresponding loss of focus and intellectual coherence.

He also argues that a strong constituency can be created by appealing to people's desire to be healthier and live a bit longer. He might be right but the resultant programme would be hopelessly inadequate in terms of addressing the deep ecological crisis nor, I guess, would it inspire many people to make the sacrifices necessary if there is to be a worthwhile future.

Overall, this book is rather frustrating. At many places, one hungers for more concrete thinking. At one point, he argues that "capitalist interests and descriptions of economic structures do not exist outside discourse". Of course, one person might think capitalist profit is due reward for risk and effort, another that is the product of exploitation. That does not change the fact that it can be clearly demonstrated that a particular firm is making big profits, that it pays low wages, that it does not pay for the damage its activities create, and that it repatriates its gains to places outside the local economy where it made its money.

Toke also sneers at "'doom and gloom' prognoses" while, conversely, talking up collective policy successes in fields such as air pollution and wildlife conservation (I must read the wrong newspaper since every week they seem to report further blows to biodiversity while global overwarming is getting hotter and hotter). I wonder whether Toke's discourse has caught a bad dose of the 'good news environmentalism' (Greg Easterbrook et al). In other places, he seems to suggest that it is possible to "maximise human welfare" without maximising "wider ecological welfare". In the short-term possibly yes, in the long run decidedly no.

A comparison might be made with John Gray's *False Dawn: Delusions of Global Capitalism*. It also attacks neo-liberalism but deals in real world dimensions rather than debates between academics. Gray writes in a much more accessible way without in any way compromising the rigour of his argument. He is also far more alive to the fact that, the odd minor victory apart, we are steadily losing the battle for the planet.

Sandy Irvine