

# Being Green

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What does it mean to be Green? Unfortunately, Green sometimes means nothing more than a fashionable life-style choice. It means wearing a “Save the Rain Forest” tee-shirt, tossing your Coke can in the recycling bin, or taking a courageous stand in favor of planting a tree. Green has become a feel-good concept. Or worse, it has turned into a marketing device. It means that some enterprising profiteer can produce a product that nobody really needs, throw in a bit of recycled material, and slap a “Green” label on it. The happy customer can buy more, contribute to trashing the earth, and feel Green at the same time. It means that your friendly neighborhood multinational can wreak social and ecological havoc in the Third World, dump pollutants on the local community if it can get away with it, and then use the profits to put its name on a few high-profile Green projects. “We’re taking whatever we can, and giving something back — just enough to look Green.”

For those who care about the Earth, being Green goes far beyond the clichés of eco-chic lifestyle and corporate greenwashing. Being Green is about the very survival of the biosphere as a complex, highly evolved web of life. It is also about resistance to the forces that produce ecological — and social — degradation. Even more, being Green means striving to regenerate our own communities and the beleaguered Earth itself, so that we will not merely survive, but rather continue the wondrous processes of growth, creativity and planetary self-realization that have given us this Green Earth. Being Green means participating in an ecological revolution that will reverse the ecocidal and genocidal direction that history is now taking, and will allow us once again to cooperate with nature in its striving toward greater diversity and richness of life-forms, of eco-communities, of human culture, of mind and imagination.

Being Green means being ecological in the authentic sense of that term, which implies much more than today’s ubiquitous preoccupation with “the environment.” No one develops deep feelings for “the environment,” though we are capable of the most intense love of our home, our land, and our planetary home, the Earth. We live in, we inhabit, our human communities — villages, towns, and cities — and our natural communities — countrysides, bioregions and biomes. And despite continuing efforts to impose a totalitarian global monoculture on these communities, they still retain much of their richly diversified, highly individualized character. Ecology is concerned with the specific places we inhabit, and the particular communities in which we live. Taken literally, it is the *logos*, the “science” or “thinking about” the *oikos*, “the household.” Being Green means thinking profoundly about the nature and needs of both our natural household, the Earth, and our social household, the whole human community, and of all the smaller households that make up these great ones. The many aspects of this undertaking are expressed concisely in what have been called the “five pillars” of the Green Movement: Ecological Wisdom, Grassroots Democracy, Social Justice, Peace, and Community Economics.

## Ecological Wisdom

Being Green means above all guiding one’s thought and practice by an ecological view of the self, society, and nature. Ecology teaches us to see all things in a holistic way. We have usually been taught to look at the world, and even ourselves, as artificially divided. We come to see ourselves as separate from nature, which we think of as an “environment” that is “out there,” surrounding our human society, which is bizarrely placed at the center of our vast universe. We are encouraged to think of humanity as consisting of separate, self-obsessed societies and nation-states, themselves divided into separate and often antagonistic social, racial, and ethnic groups. We learn to identify with those nations and groups that are “our own” and to see the others as alien and opposed to ours. Society is itself separated into different spheres, such as economics, politics, technology, and culture, life is divided into public and private realms, and morality is separated from the “real world” of power and wealth. We are even taught to see ourselves as separate “individuals” who confront society and nature as something apart from ourselves. All this becomes so familiar that we take it to be obvious “reality,” and “common sense.” In fact it’s an anti-ecological ideology for which we desperately need a cure.

What we require is the kind of holistic, ecological thinking that helps us to see the underlying connections that are overlooked in the dominant, dualistic view of things. Ecological wisdom teaches us that we cannot understand anything without understanding its place in the whole and its relationship to the other parts of that whole. We can only understand a person in relation to other people and to the community. We can only understand an organism in relation to other organisms and to the ecosystem. We can only understand economics in relation to politics, technology, culture, and to the whole of society. We can only understand human society in relation to the whole Earth. Holistic, ecological thinking means thinking unity-in-diversity. We must always keep the whole, the context, in mind, but our understanding of that whole becomes deeper, more concrete and more meaningful as we expand our detailed, intimate knowledge of all the diverse parts. Ecological wisdom teaches that our relationship to humanity is discovered through our relationships to our friends, neighbors, and loved ones. Our knowledge of nature unfolds as we come to know a particular hillside, woodland, or creek bed.

Being Green means transforming and expanding our system of values in accord with this holistic, ecological outlook. We must come to see that both in our human communities and in the larger community of nature, the good of the whole can only be achieved through a full recognition of the integrity and good of each part—each organism, each person, each species, each community. Ultimately, we must find our own good within the larger planetary good. In a world based on ecological values, institutions will be designed to realize the greatest richness and fulfillment of potentiality for the whole community of nature, through the maximum self-realization of all members of that community. Human society will then be based on cooperation and mutual aid, rather than on the egoistic pursuit of individual or group advantage. The insane and futile quest for human domination of nature will be replaced by a condition of cooperation and mutuality with the Earth. Human development will be discovered in the unfolding of our social, psychological, and spiritual potentialities, rather than in the maximized consumption of commodities through an endless devouring of “natural resources.” The human devastation of the biosphere that we see all around us will be replaced by a process of social and natural regeneration, in which nature’s tendency to create a richness of diversity, in both its natural and cultural expressions, is once again liberated.

Being Green means rejecting a morally corrupt, spiritually bankrupt culture of consumption, and working for the renewal of both society and the Earth. To see ourselves as nothing more than egoistic consumers, maximizing economic benefits individually or even collectively, leads to the triumph of cynicism and the dissolution of all true bonds of community. The dominant egoistic, economic, anti-ecological ideology has led to a loss of hope and idealism, even as it has succeeded on its own terms of vastly increased production and consumption. Greens believe that the roots of regeneration, of creative growth, and thus of hope are all around us: in the natural world, in human communities, and in our very selves. We see the need for a spiritual revolution based on a renewed, ecological self that arises out of its deep roots in the natural world and the human community. It is impossible for the self-obsessed, narcissistic ego of the consumer society to create a new ecological culture. Only the creative, life-affirming, person, whose very being synthesizes reason, passion and imagination in an ecological whole, is capable of forming truly ecological communities in dynamic harmony with the rest of nature.

## Grassroots Democracy

Being Green means working for authentic, participatory democracy. Today there is a desperate need to rethink the meaning of democracy. The conventional wisdom holds that democracy really exists if some document attests to it, or if certain rituals of mass society take place on regular occasions. In reality, democracy is a dynamic process and a set of human relationships that must constantly be recreated through the reflective, creative activity of communities of free people. True democracy means effective self-determination at the grassroots level of those fundamental social groups in which people live, work, and closely interrelate with one another. Today, most of us have little control over many

the most basic conditions of our lives: how our local communities are planned and organized; what we produce and the conditions of our labor; what moral, intellectual, and cultural values will be propagated through our vast institutional structures and communicated through the mass media. In general, people are placed in the passive position of consumers of mass-marketed products, employees in hierarchical enterprises, tax-payers in the centralized state, and clients of huge, impersonal bureaucracies. In such a context, democracy becomes no more than empty political rhetoric and deceptive ideology used to disguise oligarchy.

Being Green means completely rejecting the cynical and hypocritical political factions that have perpetuated this alienating, undemocratic system, impeded liberatory social transformation and actively promoted ecological destruction. In reality, the so-called “Democratic Party” fears nothing more than democracy—a system in which power is exercised by the people, the demos, rather than large corporations and vast government bureaucracies. In reality, the so-called “Republican Party” has complete contempt for republicanism — a system in which power is a “public thing,” a *res publica*, rather than the preserve of privileged, socially irresponsible private interests. These two wings of the official party share control of the political hierarchy, obediently defend the interests of the economic oligarchy, and dutifully authorize the policies of social and ecological destruction that this system of political and economic power demands. They are rewarded for their efforts with a virtual monopoly on political discourse. They demonstrate that it is quite possible to fool most of the people all of the time, as they successfully reduce politics to demagoguery, gossip, slander, and the art of blaming ones opponent for all the latest manifestations of evils that are deeply embedded in the dominant system. The electorate is asked to meditate on the profound issue of which conspiracy of thieves and hypocrites is worse than the other, and to ponder the momentous question of whether rapacious, exploitative corporations are better or worse than monstrous, wasteful state bureaucracies. What is really decided is how big a slice of the civic pie each gets to devour. What the public is not allowed to consider is the possibility of a fundamental democratization of politics or a fundamental transformation of institutions and values.

Reclaiming authentic democracy means returning to the traditions of the great rebellions against social domination. For example, we can look to the epoch in the French Revolution when the citizens of Paris took control of their neighborhoods in meetings of the “sections” or grassroots democratic assemblies. Or to the period in the early American Republic when radical democrats formed “Democratic-Republican Societies” to spread similar ideas of liberty, equality, and town-meeting democracy. Or to the truly utopian moment of the Spanish Revolution, when peasants and workers by the millions returned power to the grassroots and created democratically self-managed farms and factories. It also means going even further back into history and reclaiming the democratic, participatory heritage of many tribal cultures whose methods of deliberation attained an unsurpassed harmony between respect for each person and commitment to the good of the community and nature. We now live in an age in which these traditions are largely forgotten, and in which once-inspiring terms like “democratic” and “republican” have become the lifeless, hypocritical rhetoric of a system of corporate capitalist and centralized state power.

Being Green means striving to recreate truly participatory grassroots democracy, in which rule by the people becomes a vital reality rather than mere rhetoric. Greens propose the creation of institutions like neighborhood and town meetings, citizens’ committees selected by rotation and by lot, and democratic assemblies in the workplace. We propose that both decision-making and administrative functions be radically democratized, so that political domination cannot be disguised as “representation.” We work to extend democracy to all areas of public life, including not only the narrowly political, but also such important realms as education, communications media, and, not least of all, economic institutions. We reject the empty debates of liberals and conservatives over whether the federal government or states can better control peoples’ lives, or whether big government or big business can better solve the world’s problems. Greens propose instead the radical decentralization power to the local level, where people live, work, and feel the social and ecological effects of public policies. Finally, we seek to create a truly democratic culture in which the vast potentialities of each person are valued, and which takes as its

most essential task the formation of free, intelligent and morally-responsible citizens whose concern for the good of the community — the human community and the larger community of nature — is one of their most deeply-held personal values.

## Social Justice

Being Green means having a deep sense of justice and a feeling of outrage at the persistence of domination, oppression and persecution in society. While many pay lip-service to “equality before the law,” “equal treatment,” or “equality of opportunity,” these clichés are, at best, misleading, and, at worst, cruel lies, so long as injustices are deeply entrenched in the institutions of society. Greens apply holistic, ecological thinking to the question of justice, and show how the insane human quest to subjugate and dominate nature is intimately related to economic exploitation, political domination, racism, nationalism, patriarchy, heterosexism, speciesism, and other forms of injustice. Such a critique is truly radical, and goes far beyond the superficial analysis usually offered by liberals and leftists. One of the most devastating shortcomings of “progressive” movements in the United States is their inability to take a holistic, truly dialectical view of the system of domination. For liberals, this problem takes the form of what we might call the “cause of the month” approach, in which the whole interconnected system disintegrates into a collection of “social problems” that have in common little more than the quality of being bad. For leftists the problem usually takes the form of a reductionism in which all forms of domination are traced to some single underlying evil that often becomes the obsession of the sect or faction in question. The preferred target may be economic exploitation (for socialists), state domination and bureaucracy (for anarchists); racism (for Third World liberationists), or patriarchy and sexism (for feminists). In each case an important social justice concern is given a privileged status that precludes a holistic, dialectical analysis.

All of the antagonistic social forces that tear apart the fabric of society and nature are interconnected aspects of a whole — the system of domination. This system is enormously powerful, above all because it captures the imagination of society and creates a culture of domination. This culture reduces the person to a hollowed-out ego that hopelessly strives to complete itself, or fill up its emptiness, by constructing a self out of images of consumption. It is a culture that replaces life with life-style. A culture that reduces the citizen to the level of a powerless, inert consumer. A culture that spawns crime, addiction, and despair, not only for its institutionalized underclass, but, increasingly, even for its much-vaunted middle class. A culture that dissolves diversity of human culture for the sake of a degraded monoculture of mass production and consumption. A culture that creates a spiritual void, which it desperately and unsuccessfully attempts to fill through narcissistic materialism, irrational fundamentalism, hollow patriotism, and a plethora of dangerous drugs, ranging from crack cocaine to one-hundred channel cable TV. Pursuing justice means not only struggling to help the less privileged, but also, and most importantly, struggling to save the soul of society.

But it also means fighting against the most blatant forms of injustice. Being Green means developing the empathy to identify with the all of the oppressed, the persecuted, and the dominated, and not merely those who are most like ourselves or who most appeal to us. It means developing compassion, so their cause becomes our cause, their suffering our suffering, their victories our victories. It means seeing the oppressed not as passive victims, but as companions in the struggle for justice. It means overcoming guilt for our own implication in injustice, and moving beyond hatred and self-righteousness about the injustices inflicted on us. It means joining neither any elite with ambitions of leading others in the struggle for justice, nor any mass that unthinkingly follows leaders, party lines and political dogma. It means carrying on the great prophetic tradition that curses and laments all complacency in the face of injustice of any kind, and holds out a vision of a world in which justice is fully attained.

Being Green means overcoming the opposition that is sometimes posed between the ethics of justice and the ethics of care. The concern for justice has often deteriorated into an antagonistic, self-righteous

struggle for group and individual rights. Partisans of justice sometimes allow themselves to recreate in their own movements the very egoism, hostile competitiveness, and narrow self-interest that they attack in others. Rather than seeking common ground between people and groups, and appealing to what is best and most generous in others, they focus on divisive differences, objectify whole groups as enemies, create reactive defensiveness in others, and bring out what is worst in them. For Greens, the concern for justice must be an expression of our sense of community and solidarity with one another and with the Earth. We desire justice for all people and for all beings, because we have love and compassion for all members of the communities of which we are a part. Justice is thus inseparable, and indeed meaningless, apart from care. Despite the cynicism of our age, Greens have faith that a great potential for goodness and care lie deep within the hearts and souls of the vast majority of people, and that the seeds of goodness can grow into a powerful sense of justice.

## Peace

Being Green means having a deep commitment to peace. Peace and non-violence have always been a central concern for Greens, who have been among the strongest critics and resisters of war and militarism. However, peace and non-violence is much more than the absence of war. The commitment to peace is but the converse of the ecological commitment to non-domination. The root meaning of violence is violation. To act violently means to treat other beings in ways that violate their dignity and moral status. It means acting without respect, consideration, and responsibility to others. All forms of domination — economic exploitation, racism, sexism, political authoritarianism, speciesism, and so forth — are inherently violent. Non-violence means not only fighting against domination but also replacing it with an ethic and a social practice of care, concern and love. A non-violent society is one in which human beings confront other persons and nature neither with fear and hostility, nor with indifference, nor with a desire to exploit. It means practicing the principle of treating others — whether those others are human beings, other living beings, or larger natural and social communities of which we are a part — as ends having their own goods, rather than as mere means to our own ends.

We are confronted with a world in which violence seems to become ever more central to our lives. A desperate public clamors for harsher punishments, greater use of violence and coercion by the state, and even more government-sponsored killing as the means of combating violence. Citizens fear violence in the streets, increasingly become imprisoned in their homes, arm themselves massively, and withdraw from the community in despair. Within families, violence becomes more common and more deadly, and weapons bought for “protection” are in most cases used against family members instead. The state clamors for continued massive expenditures for military might and perpetuates a paranoid, defensive mentality. Many seem always ready to direct their hatreds and resentment at foreign enemies, and to take satisfaction, even if only briefly, at the slaughter of their dehumanized foes. This country continues to support the world’s largest armaments industry, and business leaders and politicians praise the economic benefits of arming feuding states, authoritarian regimes, and power-obsessed dictators.

Being Green means breaking completely with this entire culture of violence and destruction. It means coming to terms with the violence of our own history and culture, and often, our own personal values, and attempting to live more in accord with our higher ideals. It means searching for the roots of violence in the self, and finding the basis for our aggressiveness, rage, and resentment. It means becoming conscious of the aggressive, inhumane, and egoistic impulses that we have inherited as part of a patriarchal authoritarian system of values. It means recognizing the exploitative mentality that we have internalized from an antagonistically competitive and acquisitive economic system. It means uncovering the rage to control and dominate reality that is basic to egoistic and authoritarian character structures, and seeing how such impulses are reinforced by racism, nationalism and other forms of domination. It means coming to terms with our own being, including our limitations and mortality, rather than projecting our feelings of lack and unworthiness on others. It means recreating ourselves according to

the ancient principle of loving our enemies, always respecting others and recognizing their humanity, learning how to fight evil without ourselves becoming evil, and facing up to our own participation in the creation and perpetuation of certain evils. Being Green means putting into social practice the ethic of non-violence and non-domination that lies at the heart of all the great wisdom traditions, from the Judeo-Christian ideal of loving one neighbor as oneself to the Buddhist principle of showing compassion to every sentient creature. It means searching for peace within ourselves, so that we can help create peace in the world.

## Community Economics

Being Green means helping to create what the Eightfold Path of Gautama called “Right Livelihood,” in the form of a community economics. Just as ecology in the deepest sense means thinking about our “earth household,” economics in the most authentic sense means the discovery of the *nomos*, the system of laws, of the *oikos*, the biospheric household. Ecological economics completely rejects the narrow so-called “economic rationality” of the world of corporate power and financial gain. It may indeed be “profitable” to reverse the course of planetary evolution, to undermine the biological basis for complex life on earth, and to squander the “biotic capital” that nature has built up over eons of natural history. But just as the Gospels ask what profit there would be in gaining the whole world and losing one’s own soul, we might ask what kind of profits could be gained that would justify losing the whole world. If such an ecological catastrophe is to be averted, a more expansive, Green economics must emerge that will assess value not in terms of dollars, but rather in relation to the self-realization of all beings. A truly ecological economics is a community economics because it deals with the laws governing the natural wealth of communities. This wealth consists of the flourishing of the human household at every level, from the smallest local community to the great community of humanity, and of the natural household, from the simplest ecocommunity to the great biospheric ecocommunity. A Green economics is ultimately qualitative rather than quantitative, for it refuses to confuse the quantitative symbols of value with what really has value, the quality of life on Earth.

Being Green means helping to unmask the brutal anti-economics that now prevails. Today the rhetoric of freedom and individuality is used to legitimate a system of economic oligarchy in which a small elite dominates economic life, and most are placed in a position of obedience and subordination. People’s aspirations for a sphere of personal autonomy, self-determination, and creative initiative are exploited on behalf of the power of large corporations. Ironically, the idea of the “free market” is used to allow large multinationals to crush small competitors, reduce economic diversity, and place an increasing number of people in a position of economic weakness and dependency. The concept of “economic freedom” thus disguises what is in reality the freedom of powerful interests to dominate not only economic life, but increasingly, all aspects of society. Greens propose making economic freedom a reality by decentralizing economic power and democratizing economic institutions.

Being Green means working for community economics in this concrete sense. Just as Greens seek to decentralize political power from vast, irresponsible nation-states to local communities, we also strive to decentralize economic power from huge corporations and government bureaucracies to local communities. A society is not authentically democratic if the forms of political democracy disguise economic oligarchy. It is now common knowledge that the ecological costs of production for local ecosystems and the human costs of production for local workers are not calculated when economic policy is made. This is not surprising when decisions are made in the corporate headquarters of huge, distant, often transnational corporations, and when “environmental protection” is entrusted to remote state bureaucracies. Greens call for the return of economic power to the local and regional level, and for the growing democratization of all decision-making. This means turning the tide against huge corporations, economic oligarchies and monopolies, in favor of small enterprises, family businesses, family farms, farmers’ and artisans’ markets, consumer coops and buying groups, and community-supported agriculture projects. In addition, it means



democratizing larger-scale so that they can become self-managing workers' cooperatives, and town and neighborhood-run enterprises.

There is considerable resentment against policies that aim at redistribution of wealth, but which seem only to perpetuate the problems and inequities that they are allegedly designed to cure. Unfortunately, people's correct perception that something is seriously wrong often leads to policies that only punish the victims of injustice and aggravate the underlying economic disorder. Greens believe that the solution to the problem of economic inequities is not the *redistribution* of wealth, but the proper *distribution* of opportunities for satisfying work, a voice in decision-making, and fair rewards for one's productive efforts. A community economics based on economic decentralization and democratization will go a long way toward achieving this solution and achieving economic justice. In addition, by assuring that the people who make decisions concerning production are those who work in the local enterprises and live in the surrounding communities, a system of community economics will have enormous incentives to practice ecological responsibility.

## Ecological Freedom

These then, are the "pillars" of the Green Movement. Taken together, they offer an inspiring vision of what we might take as our ultimate ideal, a realm of ecological freedom. The extent to which this "Land of the Free" has increasingly developed a fear of freedom is astounding. As society fragments and decomposes, and nature is assaulted and degraded, many begin to question whether human beings are capable of acting freely without being destructive. Greens are entrusted in this cynical world with holding out hope for a future world of free, creative and cooperative human activity. It is left to us to proclaim the truth that it is not freedom that destroys, but rather it is egoism and domination that does so. When the urge to dominate prevails, it is inevitably destructive — whether it destroys through "lawlessness" or through "law and order."

Being Green means reclaiming the most radical dimensions of the tradition of freedom. It means thinking about the revolutionary implications of a familiar phrase like "liberty and justice for all." Authoritarians, reactionaries and nationalists love to impose on others the "pledge of allegiance" from which these words are taken, yet they remain oblivious to the radicalism of its principles. A society with liberty for all is one that liberates all the highest potentialities of human beings, and all other beings, and allows them the greatest degree of mutually-compatible self-realization. A society with justice for all is one that eliminates all the barriers — of domination, oppression, and coercion — to this self-realization. Imagine a society that devotes itself to the many-sided self-realization of every child born in that society. A society in which all not only achieve the fulfillment of basic needs for food, clothing, housing, and health, but in which they find a rich social and cultural environment, creative and rewarding work, intellectual stimulation, aesthetically-pleasing surroundings, ties of true community, an ethos of moral integrity, an appreciation for the joys of life and the art of living well, opportunities for spiritual development, for reflection and meditation, for communion with nature. To provide these things would require no increase in the G.N.P., but it would require a revolutionary transformation of society, its institutions and values.

Being Green means holding such an ideal, and devoting oneself to its realization: liberty and justice for all — and for the whole Earth!

The Library of Unconventional Lives

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“This article is from the period 1987–1999 when I worked with the Delta Greens and Left Green Network developing a left green position within the Green Movement.”

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