Political Ideas – Ecologism (non-core ideas)

Politics Edexcel and AQA – revision notes – based on Hodder Education revision guides

Aliza Samorly

(1) The origins of ecologism.
(2) The different types of ecologism.
(3) Core ideas and principles.
(4) Differing views and tensions.

Key concepts and ideas

Anthropocentrism = refers to the idea that the overwhelming importance is rooted in human interests, as opposed to ecocentrism. Human-centred approach.

Shallow green ecologists advocate **'enlightened anthropocentrism'** characterised by human beings act like stewardess of the environment and protect it to safeguard future generations.

Ecocentrism = refers to the idea that the overwhelming importance is rooted in nature rather than in human beings. Nature-centred approach. Human needs are subordinate to the need for ecological balance.

Biocentric equality = a doctrine that argues that all human beings within the biotic communities have equal intrinsic value. It is radical because it contradicts the ideas of anthropocentric society.

Environmental consciousness = a state of being whereby the individual's sense of self is fully actualised through a deep affiliation with the non-human environment. This consciousness will serve the basis for the emergence of a new form of social organisation that is predicated on environmental and ethical commitments.

Holism = ecological challenges are inextricably entwined and ought to be addressed within a holistic approach of 'earth', as opposed to mechanistic theories.

Industrialism = large-scale production, science-based, rationality, technology, materialism.

Aliza Samorly - aliza@imanueleducation.co.uk (+44) 07593 218036

Copyright © Imanuel Education.

Sustainability = the capacity of the ecological system to be maintained with long-lasting balance. Deep green favours strong sustainability to the extent of minimising economic growth and consumerism by transforming society to an extent it is being replaced by small communities. Shallow green ecologists advocate weak sustainability that is based on gradual reforms alongside healthier capitalism.

Consumerism = a psychological, sociological and cultural belief system focusing on consumption of goods and services that is serving individual goals for self-fulfilment and happiness and galvanises economic growth to meet these needs.

Buddhist economics = refers to the idea that people should seek simpler ways of life and working conditions with limited need for consuming goods and services leading a more natural authentic and spiritual existence.

(1) The origins of ecologism

Ecologism is a diverse movement with different doctrines; nevertheless, they share some values shaping their ideology.

Anthropocentrism = predicated on Abrahamic monotheistic religions that God gifted the environment to mankind to dominate and use it.

Rationalists from the Enlightenment such as **John Locke** argued that "we are the masters and possessors of nature", thus, implying mankind can 'mould' the environment to serve its own needs and progression.

Aldo Leopold = argued that humanity "hammered the artefact called civilisation" from the planet's natural resources.

(2) The different types of ecologism

2.1: Deep green ecology.

2.2: Shallow green ecology.

2.3: Social ecology.

2.1: Deep green ecology

- Human consciousness is anthropocentric thereby destroying ecological sustainability.
- Therefore, human consciousness must be changed towards **ecocentrism** and **sustainability**.

Copyright © Imanuel Education.

- Holism and an organic perception of the world as a whole; its 'parts' are inextricably interconnected.
- A holistic orientation that was a reaction against rationalistic and mechanistic view of the world as one that aims to serve human beings.
- Deep green ecologists argue against pressure groups and political parties that focus on single-issue challenges such as animal rights, instead of advocating a holistic approach.
- Modern capitalist economy is operating as if the resources in the land are infinite thus can be used without any concern.
- Strong sustainability is the more radical view opposing consumerism and economic growth.
- Economic activity should be aligned with preservation of natural capital based on small-scale communities.
- Weak sustainability is less militant and advocate more gradual reforms and it is based on shallow green ideas: industrialism and capitalism are here to stay thus the question becomes how to push for effective reforms.
- Reformist ideas are dismissed by deep green ecologists because they do not aim to alter human consciousness and therefore are bound to fail.
- The glue for different green ecologists is their **radical belief** in the necessity to **change human consciousness** **from anthropocentrism to ecocentrism**.

Key thinkers

Aldo Leopold (1887-1948)

Key work: *A Sand Country Almanac* (1949)

Key concepts and ideas

- Highly influential on deep green followers.
- The land ethic = extending the idea of community to include the non-human world and preserving the biotic community.
- Conservation fails = because it is based on an economic model rather than the formation of a new relationship between mankind and the land. It regards the land as a commodity with no intrinsic equal value; thus, it is bound to fail.
- The land with all its aspects: soil, water, plants and animals, does not belong to human beings who do not possess any superior values over the land = biocentric equality.
- Human nature has to shift towards environmental consciousness that does not regard land and nature as commodities/resources to be exploited.
- A holistic approach to the land.
- Biodiversity is essential to protect endangered species and their habitats and the preservation of 'wilderness' that is free from human interference.

Copyright © Imanuel Education.

- A spiritual relationship between human beings and the land.

Key quotation

"Conservation is a state of harmony between men and the land."

E. F. Schumacher (1911-1977)

Key work: ***Small is Beautiful: A Study of Economics as if People Mattered*** **(1973)**

Key concepts and ideas

- **Buddhist economics** = that is based on the idea that people matter, guaranteeing their wellbeing by limiting consumerism, and maximising spirituality and back to nature approach.
- Traditional economy is based on a fallacy that commodities and services are more important than human creative activity.
- The fallacy in consumerism is reflected in attaching the idea of 'happiness' to the consumption of goods and services.
- Natural resources should not be considered to be infinite.
- Advocated pastoralism, a return to a simpler way of life in small communities with focus on well-being rather than materialism.
- Buddhist economy should replace the current system and it is based on a simpler economic structure of self-sufficient small communities that seek wellbeing rather than profit.

Key quotation

"Infinite growth in material consumption in a finite world is an impossibility."

Murray Bookchin (1921-2006)

Key work: ***The Ecology and Freedom: The Emergence and Dissolution of Hierarchy*** **(1982)**

Key concepts and ideas

- **Ecotopia** = a society that is based on an anarcho-communist model: abolishing private ownership of property, redistribution of wealth on the basis of needs and environmental ethics. A perfect ideal society is an ecological society.
- Social structures and the state are built on oppression and led to the environmental crisis. The state must be abolished.
- Ecological destruction is the result of oppressive systems in which human beings seek to maximise power, resulting also in wars, racism, sexism and the exploitation of the third world.
- To replace the state, we need decentralised societies that are organised around a collection of self-sufficient communities instead.

Copyright © Imanuel Education.

- Coined the term **'social ecology'** to offer eco-anarchist perspective of society that is anti-capitalist and **pro-decentralisation**: small communities that achieve sustainability by being self-sufficient and less dependent.
- Shallow green ecology is ineffective because capitalism by definition prioritises economic growth regardless of the damage it leaves behind.
- Hierarchies are embedded in dominating structural systems and they need to be replaced by direct democracy where decision-making processes are communal and decentralised.
- In ecotopia, human beings will live in harmony with nature rather than exploit and dominate it.

Key quotation

"As long as hierarchy persists, as long as domination organises humanity around a system of elites, the project of dominating nature will continue to exist and inevitably lead our planet to ecological extinction."

2.2: Shallow green ecology

Reformist, not revolutionary, and does not require a transformation of environmental consciousness.

Thus, their ideas focus on enlightened anthropocentrism and weak sustainability.

- **Enlightened anthropocentrism** refers to the belief that human beings can live in harmony with nature. This harmony can be achieved through reforms of political and economic structures so they can support nature, rather than dominate and exploit nature.
- While modern economy seems to be predicated on the belief of unlimited growth that is based on the false idea of unlimited resources, the green movement counter belief is based on limits to growth that are necessary for sustainability.
- Shallow green ecology orientation is towards weak sustainability compared with the orientation of deep green towards strong sustainability, and it is based on:
  - **Managerialism** = national and international bodies can address and regulate environmental challenges.
  - **Global action** = to tackle environmental issues.
  - **Sustainable energy** = applying positive measures (such as tax reliefs) to encourage alternative forms of energy such as utilising wind, wave, thermal and nuclear power, because they do not utilise nature resources.
  - **Biodiversity** = to protect flora and fauna.
  - Local waste **recycling schemes**.
  - Strict **planning control** to protect the countryside.
  - **Energy saving** using better insulation for new buildings.

Copyright © Imanuel Education.

2.3: Social ecology

Coined by **Murray Bookchin**, the term refers to a few traditions that require a major social change in their specific field, before environmental changes can take place.

1. **Eco-socialism**

Capitalism is the core source of environmental problems and a **revolution** is required to change the economic system before environmental challenges can be addressed.

- Capitalism exploits nature by putting an economic value on its resources and stripping them of any other intrinsic value except their economic tag.
- Green capitalism is flawed because capitalism is entrenched in the idea of making profits and in economic growth rather than ecological concerns.
- Eco-socialists advocate **collective ownership** because private ownership makes people assume they are the master of the land.

2. **Eco-anarchism**

Associated with **Murray Bookchin** and it is based on the argument that people's desire to dominate and be in a position of power penetrated the way they treat nature.

- Capitalism is characterised by the need to dominate, by power imbalance and inherent inequality; it is therefore reinforced by the hierarchical structures of the state.
- Consequently, capitalism must be abolished alongside the abolishment of the state.
- An eco-anarchist society will establish and nurture new ethical guidelines to protect the environment, with decentralised small communities/bioregions that will foster harmonious bonds with the environment.
- Decentralised communities will practise strong sustainability, with human beings strongly attached to their environment in contrast to their detachment from nature that characterises capitalist societies.

3. **Eco-feminism**

Men dominate, oppress and exploit women through patriarchy and they do the same to nature through capitalism.

- Eco-feminists such as **Carolyn Merchant** argue that women have a nurturing attitude to nature compared with men. Therefore, abolishing patriarchy is the feminist goal and at the same time, it will open the way for a new more balanced relationship with nature; one that is positively affected by the establishment of equality between men and women.
- Eradicating patriarchy will create an egalitarian equilibrium between men and women, and this new coexistence in turn, will create a new perspective towards

Copyright © Imanuel Education.

the environment: one that is predicated on perceiving the environment as an equal.

Key thinker

Carolyn Merchant (1936--)

Key work: ***The Death of Nature*** **(1980)**

Key concepts and ideas

- The oppression and death of nature are linked to gender oppression: the patriarchal system is rotten from the core, and a radical restructuring is essential.
- Opposing the male view of science and nature as mechanistic. Instead, this mechanist view is replaced by a holistic orientation.
- Merchant was a pioneer of eco-feminism in the way she linked the male domination of women with the domination of nature.
- She opposed post-Enlightenment ideas that assumed that nature can be explained and be dominated by human beings in exactly the same scientific ways, at the expense of the traditional perspective of coexistence.
- The Enlightenment encouraged the assumption that science is superior to nature and nature exists to serve human needs.
- In combination with capitalism and consumerism, the result is ecological devastation = she called this result the Death of Nature.
- Patriarchy equals oppression and exploitation that shape every aspect of life and the world, nature included.

Key quotation

"Within the various acts of the ecodrama should be included scenes in which men's and women's roles come to centre stage and scenes in which nature 'herself' is an actress."

(3) Core ideas and principles

1. Ecology

Ecosystem = a biological community of interacting organisms and their physical environment.

Biodiversity = refers to the belief that as many species of animals and plants as possible need to survive to maintain the rich tapestry of nature. This will have positive effects on the eco-community.

- Ecology and its related concerns are at the heart of all strands of 'green' theories by focusing on the interactions between living organisms (animals, humans and plants) and the environment (air, water and soil).

Copyright © Imanuel Education.

- Living organisms and the environment are interdependent and consequently no ecosystem is superior to another.
- High levels of biodiversity are necessary.
- Rachel Carson, an advocate of ecology, focusing on the challenge of pollution.

Key thinker

Rachel Carson (1907-1964)

Key work: ***Silent Spring*** **(1962)**

Key concepts and ideas

- Neither the state nor society should dominate nature.
- Long-term effects of chemical pesticide damage sustainability.
- Holistic approach to nature is required.
- Nature does not exist to serve the needs of human beings.
- Pollution is destined to damage human health and thus it is also in the interest of humanity to address this problem besides the ethical commitments to nature.

Key quotation

"In nature nothing exists alone."

2. Holism

Holistic perspective that is predicated on the interconnection between every aspect of nature = **the whole is greater than the sum of its parts**.

- Biological diversity and biospherical egalitarianism are needed to preserve the ecosystem.
- Rationalistic Enlightenment thinkers rejected the idea of holism on two grounds:

1- Mechanistic world view = the idea that nature can be reduced to its key components and each can be investigated independently.

2- Dominion over nature = **Francis Bacon,** the Enlightenment thinker argued that if nature can be understood it can thus be dominated by man.

- Various strands of ecologism consider the above to be the direct cause of environmental devastation.

3. Environmental ethics

While ethical discourse is practically limited to humans, ecologists ventured beyond this boundary to shape environmental ethics in three main areas:

1- Obligations to future generations to preserve the environment.
2- Animal rights: humans have a moral responsibility to animals' survival and wellbeing.

Copyright © Imanuel Education.

3- Holistic ethics: our moral commitments cannot be limited to human life and must be extended to nature.

4. Environmental consciousness

Focus on the necessity to consider the environment and its needs, thus nurturing related consciousness.

- Human nature must transcend egoistic self-centredness towards the coexistence and harmony with nature.
- Environmental consciousness will be good for people because if it is healthy it is going to benefit the individual.

5. Post-materialism and anti-consumerism

Happiness will be redefined by environmental consciousness, and it will move away from the features of capitalism and consumerism.

- Materialism in modern capitalist societies increasingly defines happiness and economic growth is continuously required to sustain this association = false consciousness.
- While dark green ecologists such as Schumacher advocated a radical post-materialist society, shallow green ecologists lean towards a conserver rather than a consumer society, thus individuals should consume less, lower production and preserve resources.

6. Sustainability

Sustainability requires:

1- **Biodiversity:** preservation of natural habitats to preserve the natural state of plants, animals and the whole ecosystem.
2- **Preservation** of natural resources: moving away from fossil-based fuels towards renewable energy resources; increased recycling to counterbalance consumption.
3- **Preservation of the ecosystem:** to counter the degradation of the natural environment by measures such as quotas on fishing, planning laws and preserving rainforests.
4- **Pollution control:** limits on emissions into the atmosphere and on pollution of seas and rivers.

- Sustainability demonstrates the attitude of shallow green managerialism in ecology by focusing on regulation at both national and international levels and focus on reforms to restore homeostasis. Deep green, in contrast, disregard it as futile and naïve and its focus is on radical changes.

Copyright © Imanuel Education.

(4) Differing views and tensions

1. Human nature

Shallow green:

- Humans are anthropocentric based on the monotheistic idea that God created the planet to be ruled over by mankind.
- Human nature has to transform towards being responsible 'stewards' of nature.
- Carson, human beings exploit the environment.
- Environmental consciousness.
- Environmental ethics.

Deep green:

- Environmental consciousness needs to be implanted within the natural world rather than be separated from it.
- A revolutionary change of human nature is a must.
- Creating radical environmental ethical obligations.
- Leopold, strong sustainability and biocentric equality where elements such as the soils, waters, plants and animals are characterised by their intrinsic value rather than by how they serve human beings.

Social ecologists:

- A radical social change before any environmental consciousness can be made possible, Merchant.

2. The state

Shallow green:

- Weak sustainability and managerialism with regulation at a national and international levels.
- Other shallow green ecologists advocate for more free-market solutions such as green capitalism: Nestle's zero deforestation policy.
- Identified with the post-Enlightenment mechanistic world view: the state emphasis on technological solutions such as carbon-capture technology to control climate change.
- Carson and Leopold: the state needs to play an important role in protecting the environment.

Deep green:

- Schumacher, the state should be decentralised, leading to localism, pastoralism and strong sustainability.

Copyright © Imanuel Education.

- Bookchin, the state must be abolished because it is an enemy of liberty and nature.

Social ecologists:

- Eco-anarchists and eco-socialists, the state imposes capitalism and industrialism and it needs to be abolished.
- Eco-feminists, Merchant, the state reinforces patriarchy.

3. Society

All critical of consumerism and materialism and call for a post-materialistic existence.

- Shallow green: society needs to reform and protect the environment.
- Deep green: radical changes from industrialism into small-scale and self-sufficient communities.
- Social ecologists: societal transformation must precede the protection of the environment.

4. The economy

Ecologism is rather divided about its attitude to the economy, because of differing views about its role in the damage to the environment.

- Deep green and social ecologists such as eco-anarchists and eco-socialists: capitalism must be abolished via a revolution, nothing else would do. The economy will exist in a communist form with collective rather than private ownership.
- Shallow green: a state regulation can balance economic growth with ecologism. Some argue that green capitalism will be based on consumers demanding environmental-friendly products, resulting in greater sustainability.

Copyright © Imanuel Education.