

Ecologism: Toward Ecological Citizenship

Mark J. Smith

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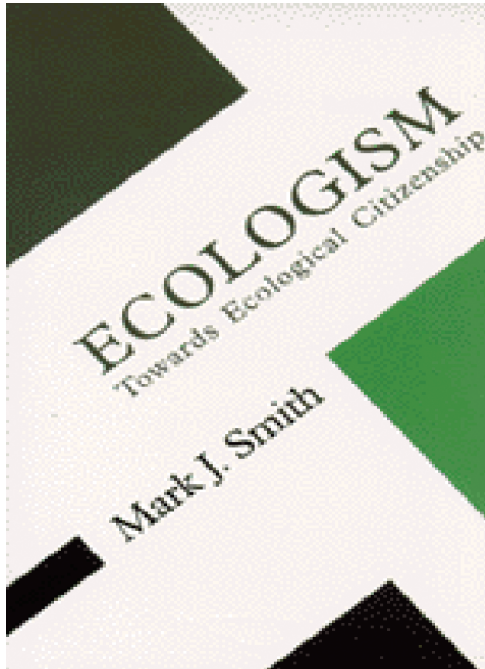
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In this short book, Mark J. Smith argues that the time has come for a new phase in making evaluative decisions concerning contemporary social and political policy. A phase based on what he calls "ecologism". Ecologism is defined as a way of thinking that is not based on the assumption that human beings hold a privileged or central position in social and political evaluation.

The case for adopting ecologism is presented well and framed within arguments related to ethical debates concerning intergenerational equity, the relationship between humans and non-human animals, the notion of justice and the associated notions of entitlements and obligations. The book begins with a brief overview of the work of key individuals on the conceptualization of nature in the modern world, including among others, such writers as Thoreau, Leopold, Carson, the Club of Rome, and Naess. This introduction serves as a good general background for further discussion regarding the relationship between human beings and nature.

In the chapter that follows, the author argues that rights/entitlements are always associated with obligations and duties, but the problem is that often it is the case that the latter is ignored as the tendency

to pursue self-interests in matters political and social becomes dominant. He then extends the idea of obligations and duties to those of future generations and in this context argues that decisions involving the environment and nature, for example the use of nuclear power or resource depletion, will clearly have a detrimental impact on future generations. His argument is that ecologism will help members of society and the decision-makers to recognize the importance of intergenerational equity in policy-making. The third chapter develops a similar argument in regard to non-human animals. After reviewing various perspectives and debates on animal rights and moral obligations to animals in a balanced academic but critical manner, Smith makes the case for extending the moral community to include animals and the ecosystem in general, so that once again, in an ecologicistic way, human beings will recognize their obligations and duties towards nature.

The fourth chapter deals with the relationship between individualism and the social order and the role of ecology in that complex relationship. After giving a succinct review of the assumptions underlying the various political theories (such as liberalism, neoliberalism, conservatism), the author then shows how ecological thinking challenges these prevailing ideologies at some points but shares commonalities with them at other points. For example, he notes that liberal thinking clearly recognizes the obligations to others, it does not recognize the obligations humans have towards non-human things, and as such, liberal and neoliberal thinking are anthropocentric. On the other hand, conservative thinking does dovetail with ecological thinking by raising the importance of connecting with the past, present and future (hence recognizing the issue of intergenerational equity) and by being prone to "risk aversion" in dealing with complex and unpredictable matters such as the relationship between society and nature.

Next, in the fifth chapter, Smith considers emancipatory type ideologies such as socialism, Marxism, anarchism and feminism and how they do or do not relate with ecological thinking. Once again the author gives a concise review of the various perspectives but the discussion here tends to be quite abstract at points.

The final chapter, entitled "The Prospects for Ecological Citizenship", contains a critical evaluation of three contemporary attempts which theorize about the relationship between society and nature, namely,



social constructionism, the realist approach, and the risk society perspective. The author appears to be the least critical of Ulrich Beck's risk society thesis. He notes that such a perspective at least explicitly recognizes the limitations of human knowledge, particularly in regard to a raised public consciousness about ecological risks. Such consciousness or recognition of modern environmental risks may have the potential to serve as an impetus for society to be re-organized along the lines of an "ecological democracy" with ecologism as its central tenet. However, Smith notes that risk avoidance as an impetus for change may be an anthropocentric impetus because risk avoidance may not necessarily promote respect for the environment, but humans seeking to protect their own selves.

In evaluating this book, I must admit that I am not completely "won over" by the argument for ecologism. Among other things, my objections are based on the view that human beings are to some extent exceptional to other living things because of the usual arguments put forth about this (for example, the superior ability to use symbols, develop culture, moral thought, empathy, knowledge of our own mortality and so on), and many of these conventional arguments were not addressed to the extent required. However, I do not feel that convincing the reader is what should be considered the main goal of this text (although the author may feel differently). In this light, I feel that this book does an admirable job in introducing complex issues and ideologies in a very readable and understandable manner. Further, it encourages theoretical thinking about the environment-society relationship (an emphasis that seems to be underdeveloped in North America, less so in Britain and Europe), and I believe this book is an important contribution in this direction. The main contribution of this book I believe would be for teaching at the undergraduate level in a course in environmental sociology or environmental studies. I make this comment because I believe that this book raises many issues which would stimulate interesting and useful discussion in the classroom, and as such, the book would best be used as a supplementary text for undergraduate lectures and tutorials focusing on the relationship between society and nature.

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