

Title of workshop: Reframing environmentalism? Environmental Political Theory in the Anthropocene.

Subject area: Environmental Politics, Sustainability Theory, Environmental Ethics, Environmental Humanities.

Abstract of workshop

Although climate change has brought about a new awareness of environmental problems, it has also complicated our view of the socionatural relationship and hence the conversation about the transition away from unsustainability. It has done so by exposing the degree of what may be termed the ‘metabolic exchange’ between society and nature, which is the outcome of a long history of reciprocal influence and human intervention. In this context, the notion of the ‘Anthropocene’ has emerged as an attempt to encompass the human ability to act as a powerful agent of environmental change. Yet we are also re-discovering the extent to which we are ourselves influenced and constrained by the nonhuman environment. If it is increasingly difficult to distinguish between society and nature, arguing that the achievement of sustainability can be achieved by humans *retreating* from the natural world also becomes untenable. Thus, a number of questions arise:

- How is environmental political theory responding to the challenge of the Anthropocene?
- And how should it actually respond?
- Are the premises of classical environmentalism still valid?
- What is involved in the project of naturalistic ethics after the end of nature?
- What about the new salience of justice?
- Is there room for understanding between a reformist environmentalism and a more radical strand that seeks post-capitalistic solutions to climate change?

The advent of climate change has already transformed and challenged environmentalism in its far-reaching consequences for the analysis, values, motivations etc. upon which it is based. This workshop will try to elucidate whether a new, ‘fourth-wave’ environmentalism is emerging, entailing the end of environmentalism as we knew it – or whether the news of the death of environmentalism is exaggerated.

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The need for a workshop

A considered and ‘root and branch’ reflection about the ‘state of the discipline’ of environmental political theory (EPT) is needed. More than ten years ago, an ECPR Joint Session was devoted to discuss the ‘death of environmentalism’ in the hands of liberal normalization (see the resulting Levy and Wissenburg 2004). Yet the circumstances have changed dramatically since then in at least two crucial ways. On the one hand, we are going through a long financial crisis, among the effects of which is a growing mistrust of liberal-capitalism as the appropriate political and economic model through which to make collective decisions and achieve justice in a sustainable manner. On the other hand, anthropogenic climate change has been increasingly confirmed as a major threat, somewhat renewing the public salience of socionatural relations, but also marking a rejuvenated emphasis on ‘survivalism’ to the detriment of more nuanced questions about conservation. These two are linked, since ‘survivalism’ may both be premised upon and lead to a rejection of democracy (since democracy is not necessary for human survival in the face of climate change), whereas a rejection of the market economy may be based upon and lead to a ‘post-growth’ society (since growth may not be necessary for a sustainable economy or society). At the same time, the question of justice has reappeared in connection to the unequal impacts of climate change. Finally, a new understanding of nature can be discerned – one that by underlining the complexity and intensity of human-natural entanglement and what may be called the ‘social quality of nature’ opens up new possibilities of human intervention and manipulation in and of the nonhuman world thanks to biotechnological advances the ethical implications of which have yet to be discussed.

It is thus not surprising that the once foreseen theoretical ‘pacification of environmentalism’ has not succeeded. On the contrary, an unofficial split within environmentalism seems to be taking place, separating those who aim to push it in a new direction in terms of embracing the positive potentials of the ‘Anthropocene’, and those who believe this to be a detour that is not ‘green’ at all. However, the conversation has been so far rather disperse and indirect, lacking a conscious effort about the changes which an increasingly looser and interdisciplinary sub-discipline of EPT is undergoing. It might be that a new decade is marking the birth of a ‘fourth-wave’ environmentalism. This workshop serves as a place to discuss this possibility, helping us to gain some perspective on the aforementioned changes, as well as on its meaning and desirability. As mentioned earlier, these questions have not been covered by any ECPR Workshop in over a decade. The directors expect the result to become the basis of a special issue of a journal and of an edited book about the need to reframe environmentalism in the Anthropocene.

Relation to existing research

The development of environmental political theory in the last decade is characterised by the field becoming increasingly diverse, thus this workshop offers an opportune time to review, take stock and ask some fundamental questions about the future evolution of the area. After a series of successive waves of green thinking, all of which have marked a step forward for the field, making it increasingly plural and open, increasingly concerned with general questions of political and economic organisation, and home to a diverse set of normative values, we seem to be at a crossroads for environmentalism.

For one thing, the current theoretical landscape is multifarious. Some authors advocate a technologically rejuvenated environmentalism (Mol 2008, Brand 2009, Greer 2009, Tomlinson 2010), while others insist on pursuing ecocentric goals going back to nature (Haila and Dyke 2006, Sale 2006). There are those for whom a correction of capitalist markets – without overthrowing them – is the most realistic path to sustainability (Porritt 2005, Spence 2009), whereas for others it can only be achieved after capitalism is dismantled or severely corrected (Albert 2006, Patterson 2009, Barry 2012). The advocates of a more

reformist environmentalism (Carter 2007, Humphrey 2003, Arias-Maldonado 2012) clash against those who see it as a radical ideology which has to remain so (Blühdorn 2007, Derber 2010), whereas others advocate the overcoming of pessimism and the adoption of a more positive narrative for environmentalism and its goals (Schmidt 2005, Wapner 2010, Princen 2010, Schor 2010). A divide is also perceptible in the field of sustainability studies, wherein defenders of ‘strong’ sustainability demand a complete break from current dominant forms of socio-economic organisation, whereas supporters of ‘weak’ sustainability prefer a more moderate approach to ‘green’ the current social model, best expressed in the theory of ‘ecological modernisation’ (Ott and Döring 2004, Neumayer 2010, Mol et al. 2009). At the same time, the idea of ‘nature’ itself is becoming more and more complicated. For example, we witness the emergence of a discourse concerned with the enlargement of the non-human world to which we ought to pay attention (the ‘new materialism’ suggested by Bennett 2006), thanks to a more subtle consideration of the multi-faceted ways in which social artifacts, technologies and symbols are mixed up with the environment (hence the notion of ‘technonatures’ proposed by White and Wilbert 2009). At the same time we also have several reconsiderations of the ‘nature of nature’ as it were in light of its progressive humanisation (Latour 2004, Hinchliffe 2008, Kaebnick 2011), and to the new kind of attention that the humanities are paying to the complicated history of such entanglements, including our relationship to animals (Smail 2008, Russell 2011, Shipman 2011, Haraway 2007). Finally, the literature on climate change is growing very fast, giving room to a sophisticated debate about the economic, political and ethical implications of this wide-ranging, world-changing phenomenon (Hulme 2009, Gardiner *et al.* 2010, Held *et al.* 2011).

There are a number of binary ways to make sense of this theoretical diversity within environmental political theory: deviationism *versus* authenticity, pragmatism *versus* utopianism, reformism *versus* radicalism. None of them, however, seem complete enough. Pragmatists trying to put political outcomes before principles have principles too; in the end, radicals may achieve less revolutionary outcomes than reformists, and so on. Maybe the most accurate and simplest distinction is between those trying to move green politics beyond its traditional – ecocentric *or* anti-capitalistic – foundation, without predetermining the outcome of such theoretical venture, and those who resist such attempts, defending environmentalism as a nature-centred and therefore by definition a more ‘radical’ ideology.

Be that as it may, environmental political theory cannot ignore the challenge and opportunities of the Anthropocene: a complicated socionatural relationship demands also a complicated environmentalism. In this regard, the time seems ripe for a reappraisal of the state of the field. Something is missing in the current debate and this is some systematic reflection upon the terms on which this debate is taking place. In other words, the existing EPT literature is rich in perspectives, but we do need a general or meta-perspective on that literature that helps us to identify the changes that environmentalism is going through, as well as the direction/s in which it seems to be heading. Therefore, the workshop will combine an analytical and a normative approach, since we need to know what *is* actually happening within environmentalism in order to reflect upon what *should* happen in the near future.

A number of topics or groups of topics can be identified that may help us in making sense of the seemingly disorganized environmental conversation that is taking place now:

- (i) the ‘nature of nature’ and the character of the socionatural interaction, with corresponding consequences for the debate about anthropocentrism and human-nonhuman (including animals) relationships;
- (ii) climate change and the questions related to environmental justice, including the role of the market and greening ‘business as usual’ as opposed to a post-growth, well-being oriented economy.
- (iii) sustainability as an encompassing issue which sums up what EPT is about, while at the same time being a very specific realm wherein the normative conclusions about nature and its substitutability possess a formidable relevance.

The resulting questions about the character and future direction of environmentalism are latent in the current literature, as well as the answers to them. This workshop will help us to make them salient, thus

raising the self-awareness of the field and outlining the features of what apparently is a fourth wave of environmental thinking.

Likely participants

This workshop invites contributions from academics who wish to contribute to the definition of their field, either because they have an interest in this kind of reflection, or because they are contributing directly to set its direction and are able to consider their efforts from a different point of view, i.e. the relationship of the former with environmentalism writ large. Expertise in environmental politics, ethics, and humanities, as well as in the politics of climate change and new technologies, is welcome. The directors hope for contributions from academics at any stage of their career and will particularly encourage PhD students.

Type of papers

The workshop directors welcome papers from a variety of disciplinary perspectives, ranging from environmental political theory and philosophy to environmental ethics and humanities, political economy and environmental movement studies - in order to reflect the diversity of the current environmental conversation, as well as its increasing commitment to genuine interdisciplinarity. The directors will also seek to have the majority of papers published both in special issue of a high-impact English language journal (such as *Environmental Politics*) and in an edited collection with ECPR books. Accordingly, they ask for papers containing original research at a reasonable stage of development.

Funding

Manuel Arias-Maldonado will seek funding from his own University, as well as from the Spanish Association of Political Science and the Spanish Ministry of Education. John Barry will seek funding from his own University (through the Institute for a Sustainable World) and UK research council sources of funding (British Academy and Economic and Social Research Council).

Workshop participants will be encouraged to apply for travel bursaries at their respective institutions.

Biographical Notes

Manuel Arias Maldonado is an Associate Professor in Political Science at the University of Málaga. He has researched extensively on the field of environmental political theory. He was a Fulbright Scholar at the University of Berkeley and a visiting scholar at the Rachel Carson Center in Munich. His latest book is *Environment & Society. Socionatural Relations in the Anthropocene* (Springer, 2015).

John Barry is Professor in the School of Politics, International Studies and Philosophy and Associate Director of the Institute for a Sustainable World at Queen's University Belfast. He has written extensively about normative aspects of the politics and ethics of sustainability, citizenship and sustainability; the political economy of sustainability and the politics of renewable energy. His latest book, published with Oxford University Press, addresses issues of green political theory and practice framed in terms the transition from 'actually existing unsustainability'.

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