

BABEȘ-BOLYAI UNIVERSITY
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Green Liberalism.

***A Philosophical Investigation of the Ideology of Individual Freedom
and Social Sustainability***

DOCTORAL THESIS

ABSTRACT

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The aim of the thesis is to answer the question: *What is green liberalism?* Its subject is the new political ideology taking shape as a result of liberal reflections facing green critiques. The research took place between the boundaries of political philosophy. Answering the main question required more than the identification and study of the literature on green liberalism.

Taking account of the fact that in our region this subject earned little attention and the focus has mainly been on specific schools of green political thought rather than on a comprehensive metaanalysis, the research had to be extended to cover the problem of political ideology in general and the field of the green political thought and ideologies in particular. To answer the question whether green liberal political ideology exists, the topic of political ideology had been examined in details.

The hypothesis of the research was that green liberalism is the most recent stream of liberalism emerging as a liberal effort to countervail the illiberal trends identified within green movements, parties and theories. One of the findings of the research was that the green topics were present in the liberal political thought far earlier than it is commonly reflected in general knowledge. Some of the theories of well-known liberal thinkers played a huge role in shaping the contemporary green thoughts. Although it is hard to deny that in the 20th century the green critique of the liberalism was the trigger of the liberal reflections on the environmental and ecological problems. Having said all this, the emerging stream of green liberalism cannot be seen and thought of as lacking any background; it is related to the liberal tradition and it stands on the ground of Rawlsian political liberalism.

If Michael Freeden's theory on political ideology is accepted, green liberalism can be seen not only as a trend in liberal political thought, but as a political ideology on its own. In this interpretation political ideologies are defined not only by their core concepts, but by the unique formation and relation among the concepts, which gives them their own identities. The major political ideologies are not seen as one single political ideology divided into different branches, but rather as families of individual political ideologies. In this approach green liberalism can be seen as the youngest member of the family of liberal

political ideologies, one with a particular identity; its core concepts include the idea of ecological sustainability and protection of the natural environment.

It cannot be denied that every ideologically determined actor now, under the pressure of crises, must give ideological answers to the environmental, ecological problems – even if they ignored them until the last possible moment. Now they must examine the ideologically compatible set of solutions – if they exist.

The research was strongly influenced by the aforementioned aspect: to examine if liberalism has answers to the environmental crisis. The paradigm of the research is defined by Quentin Skinner's theory on the history of ideas: the political ideology of green liberalism is investigated on the level of political philosophy theories.

Chapter one presents the aspects related to the conceptual field, the frame of the analysis and the method. The topic of ideology and political ideology and their relation to the political thinking, political theory, political philosophy and political action are investigated.

The second chapter deals with the field of green political thinking and green political ideologies. The new concepts and their backgrounds are examined. The chapter reviews influences which had a strong effect on the emergence of green political ideologies: the science of ecology, the heritage of old conservationists, the contribution of the new left, the influence of the continental philosophy, the role of the new environmental fields of research, the impact of green parties.

The green thoughts, movements and theories are strongly bound to the postmodern approach. The political ideologies of modernity were meant to solve the problems of the era when they were invented. The political ideologies of the industrialization were not prepared to deal with the environmental or ecological crisis. They were born as part of the problem, not part of the solution. The perception of the environmental or ecological crisis raised new questions which were not addressed until then because it was no need to address them, and seriously contested conceptions which seemed decent before.

The green critique brought a different approach in the fields of economy, politics, science, technology and a particular image of nature, political community, state, rights, obligations, justice, good life, wellbeing, decision making and political action.

When John Locke developed the basic concepts of liberal political ideology in the 17th century, he could not foresee that the infinite, abundant and diverse environment and resources which seemed to be out of the reach of human action, and looked as if they cannot be polluted, deteriorated, wasted, will one day prove to fall short of this status.

When Rachel Carson in 1960 starts to write her book, the *Silent Spring*, she had no intention to become one of the founders of a new political ideology, but she drove the attention to an anomaly which at the end proved to be more than a business or scientific concern; it was recognized as a problem on the fields of ethics, social critique and philosophy.

It was unbelievable that humans could influence in such a powerful way their environment that it must be measured on the scale of geological epoch – the Anthropocene was unthinkable. On the level of green thinking and green political ideologies the mechanical worldview of Cartesian origins had been rejected. Nature is seen as an organic entity in a spontaneous and perpetual change and humans lost their central and privileged position in this new worldview.

The third chapter deals with the political ideology of green liberalism. First, the object of green critique is clarified. Next, we review the history of liberalism, the emergence, development and content of each of the members of the family of these political ideologies based on a comprehensive literature of green liberal reflections on the level of political philosophy.

Green liberalism can be seen as a political ideology on the boundaries of two families of political ideologies. It is defined both by the liberal tradition and the green perspective – it can be considered both the critique of the grey liberalism and the critique of the illiberal green ideologies in the same time. Green liberalism is more than a theory, there are political parties which assume it as their political ideology in Switzerland, Netherlands and in the United Kingdom.

The core conceptions of the green critique are the relationship between humankind and their natural environment, the position of humans in the ecological systems. In the early times of liberalism, the Cartesian and Newtonian dualist, mechanistic theories were considered progressive views; the concepts of the liberal political ideology were formulated in this, back then, innovative frame. They were important elements of the early modern worldview. The main target of the green critique is especially the most innovative early modern concept of liberalism, the concept of the unrestricted rights bound to private property – a critique accepted by the green liberals. It is important to notice that the target of the green critique is mainly the neoliberal political ideology, the hegemonic political ideology of mainstream western politics at the beginnings of the green movements.

The political ideology of green liberalism finds its mentor in John Stuart Mill (1806–1873) who claims that economic growth is impossible without sideeffects on societies and

their natural environments. The old liberalism is characterized by Macpherson as the ideology of possessive individualism; Mill at the middle of the 19th century reinvented the liberal political thought in a way which had a strong impact on the core concepts of the political ideology and finally resulted in a new formation of concepts with a particular identity – the new liberalism was born. His theory took into account the natural environment. He goes beyond the perspective of old liberalism, and attributes more importance to nature; he sees it not merely as material base for human survival but also as a source of human wellbeing.

The importance of Mill's philosophy for green liberalism stands not only in his critique of the consumerist culture but because he was the first to give a philosophic account on the concept of sustainability – it became a strong platform for green liberals in their effort to place their theories in the liberal tradition. Moreover, Mill gave voice to his hope that mankind shall realize the importance of zero economic growth before the experience of scarcity of resources forces them to do so.

The influential green liberal theorist, Marcel Wissenburg draws attention upon the importance of consumer freedom which played a decisive role in the emergence of liberal democracies. The ecological problems are bound to the freedom of consumption and raise the necessity to deal with the tension between consumer freedom and sustainability on the level of green liberal theory.

The aim of the green liberal theoretical reflections is given by the necessity to find an acceptable solution for the coercion of individual freedoms in the name of sustainability on theoretical level and to analyze the dimensions and impacts of it on the core concepts and values of liberalism – in order to prevent the bleak consequences of neglecting it.

After Mill, the topic of the natural environment fell out from the liberal political discourse. It was rediscovered because of the green critique and no earlier than the end of the 1970s. The first green liberal theoretical efforts were made after John Rawls (1921 – 2002) published his influential work *The Theory of Justice* in the year of 1972. The first green liberal philosophical reflections started from trying to extend the Rawlsian egalitarian concepts to environmental problems. At the same time the theories of Locke, Jefferson, Hume and Mill were investigated from a green liberal perspective, in a search for legitimation of the founding fathers of the liberalism that will allow for the integration of the new theories in the liberal tradition.

Wissenburg makes it clear that green liberals must take into account the critiques of the greens over preference formation in liberal democracies and to accept that individual

preferences are not ready made but influenced by the supply side of the economic interactions, therefore they must take seriously the problem of environmental education and its role in eliminating the ecologically harmful individual practices. The green liberal political ideology and its conception of the state is not neutral regarding the values and way of life of their citizens. Green liberals – if they claim the epithet green– have to restrain the exploitation of nature and have to restrain the freedom of consumption and the property rights in the name of sustainability and in the same time they have to defend the plurality of preferences and diversity of ways of life in order to stay liberals.

Green liberalism in the view of Wissenburg is about the searching for the possibility of this trade-off and trying to develop a suitable theory for it. The main concern of green liberalism is social sustainability – this is what makes the ecological and economic sustainability important. It becomes a political problem because of its consequences on human survival and the future of liberal societies. Green liberalism does not reject the use of nature in order to satisfy human needs or the idea of transforming it in consumer goods, but is aware of the fact that not every preference can be reasonably accepted in the context of ecological crisis. It cannot avoid ranking the preferences which are formulated by the members of societies in the term of necessary or dispensable. Even property rights must not allow the arbitrary destruction of goods which could be used by somebody in need of it – in our days or in the future.

Social sustainability requires more than ecological and economic sustainability. It requires a sustainable culture and environment friendly attitudes. Sustainability can be achieved in multiple ways; neither the economic growth, nor the growing population endangers it unconditionally. The concept of ecological sustainability shows that sustainability is nothing more than the balance of a system; the particular features of its elements are irrelevant. In the perspective of social sustainability, the balance can be achieved by more or less liberal means, but the way of life of the members of societies are affected deeply by this choice. Political actors and theorists who find sustainability compatible with economic growth put their faith in innovative solutions which can assure growing consumption and decreasing need of resources and pollution in the same time. The others who reject the idea of economic growth value more certain ways of life and certain landscapes endangered by limitless growth. There is no theoretical obstacle to a future world in which every corner of the Earth looks like a metropolis and this world still remains sustainable both in ecological and economical meaning. The quality of human life in such an environment is a different topic. Although green liberal theorists – following the

path of Rawls – demand from the members of every society to put the question of justice before their own interests and to restrain their own preferences for the sake of a livable society for everyone and to not endanger the stability of the political system with them. In the view of green liberals, liberal concepts must not be interpreted as a guarantee for the implementation of every preference formulated by every member of a society –the ones which are harmful for others, or put an unbearable burden on the whole society are not acceptable. It seems that there is a safety net incorporated in the liberal theory which allows liberal democracies to sort out and restrain those preferences which endanger social sustainability and the quality of life of the members of the society. Liberalism in general and green liberalism in particular never rejected the idea of public good, it denied only those claims that hold the one and only truth and the only good way of life can be defined. They never denied that a society is able to recognize a preference as extremely dangerous for the public good. All things considered, there is no need to step out of the boundaries of the green liberal political ideology to ensure social, ecological or economic sustainability.

If Wissenburg can be considered liberal first and green second, Hailwood and Stephens – as the later made it clear – are green first and liberal second. They reject the idea of an instrumentalized nature. Hailwood attributes sovereignty and independence from humanity to nature. He conceptualizes nature defined by otherness and indifference toward humanity or any other specific form of life. To recognize the sovereignty of nature calls for recognizing nature as an end not merely as a means, recognizing its processes and states as independent of human needs, it can not be perceived merely as an instrument of human preferences. Beside the recognition of nature as an end, nature must be valued most in its original form. Although nature can be shaped by humankind, artificial landscapes cannot have equal value to that of the wilderness. The copy – holds Hailwood – never reach the value of the original, therefore the original must be protected.

Green liberalism cannot get around the problem of limiting the market and private property rights if they endanger social sustainability and a certain quality of life or landscapes.

One of the conclusions of the research is that an important change took place nearly simultaneously in the science of ecology and in the field of green political ideologies, which can be considered a landmark in both cases: on the one hand, the scientists gave up the idea of equilibrium as the normal state of an ecosystem and adopted instead the idea of instability; on the other hand, the green thinkers gave up the idea of searching for illiberal solutions to the problem of ecological crisis and adopted the idea that liberal democracies

are not merely the source of the crises but part of a heritage which is worth saving and must be fixed and used to deal with the crises. Both of these two phenomena contributed to the new trend in the early 2000s; more and more greens turned to the theoretical problem of greening the grey liberalism.

The study of green liberalism cannot neglect the fact that the newest member of the family of the liberal political ideologies is not only located on the boundary of two families of political ideologies but also on the boundary of two paradigms – some of its components reflect the ideologies of modernity while other components are rooted in postmodern theories. Green liberalism is not only a liberal self-reflection generated by the environmental or ecological crisis, but a liberal reflection on the postmodern experience and the different approaches of its theories. The tension of these two paradigms acts as an important force in shaping the new political ideology. Still, it cannot be easily said if an adept of green liberalism is a promoter of green ideology interested in reforming liberalism, or a liberal interested in the project of integrating green ideas in his own ideology. As we have seen there are examples for both.

Green liberalism is the member of liberal political ideologies along with classical liberalism, neoliberals, social liberalism or egalitarian liberalism. We can identify two streams of green liberalism. The first stream interprets it as a comprehensive theory; the second stream interprets it merely as a formal theory. On the one hand green liberalism is seen as a source of specific policy solutions, reflects the Millian tradition, on the other hand as the traits of the Rawlsian political liberalism which cannot decide for the members of a given society what policies are useful for them; its role is only to develop the principles suitable for a sustainable society and to restrain the overuse and overpollution of nature while taking into account the interests of marginalized people and future generations.

The political ideology of green liberalism recognizes the role of the state in the process of dealing with the environmental and ecological problems; it recognizes the necessity of some restraining policies, but the point of reference remains the member of every society: the individual. It is concerned in the same time about the non-human nature and the future generations, but if it has to prioritize it's the living human individual who matters the most. Accordingly, it finds it unacceptable to restrain the rights of individuals too much – not even citing the interest of future generations or the value of untouched, pristine nature.

Green liberals respect society and their institutions, but they value individual freedom too, they give great importance to all aspects of sustainability, but do not accept the use of too coercive solutions to guarantee them.

From the green liberal perspective, it is not the state but the citizens who have to decide what means the humankind should use for surviving the environmental and ecological crisis.

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