

**Andrew Dobson**

***Environmental Politics: A Very Short Introduction***

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As the title suggests, Andrew Dobson's latest book is a very slim volume. Nevertheless, it packs a punch and fulfils its purpose by providing a very firm grounding in the area of environmental politics. The book starts with an introduction detailing five vignettes of how environmentalism may manifest itself in the world. It then continues with five chapters that describe the past, present and future of environmental politics.

Turning to look at the introduction, the reader may be surprised at the contrasting and uneven 'personal' manifestations of environmental policy that Dobson outlines in the developed and developing worlds. Those in the 'developed world' dutifully undertake their recycling and this may be transported to the 'developing world' where the hard work often begins: the waste is separated and the tedious job of removing paper labels from plastic bottles may provide an individual with a livelihood. In another vignette, villagers in the developing world suffer upheaval to their lives as they may be more easily relocated in order to allow the construction of hydroelectric dams and suchlike. The reader may be struck by the contrast in these vignettes: that as the developed world accommodates environmentalism in its daily activities; those in the developing world may bear the brunt of lifestyle changes.

Chapter 1 looks at the past and is entitled 'Origins'. This recounts a narrative of how humanity has increasingly impinged upon the environment. Firstly, by moving from hunting to agriculture; and then, after accepting the Enlightenment's ideas of progress, embarking upon the industrial revolution. A final stage of this history is the description of the beginning of environmental politics as we may recognise it today, with the formation of environmental

movements in the 1960s and 1970s. At this point, a major paradox is noted: environmental politics should provide ‘solutions to unsustainability’ with ‘unsustainability’ being a problem that humanity has caused (p. 8). Furthermore, an important theme that often accompanies the dialogue surrounding environmental politics is introduced: that the Earth’s finite resources will limit economic growth (pp. 16–17).

With Chapter 2 entitled ‘Ideas’, the author moves to the present day and furnishes the major notions that currently circulate within environmental political discourse: anthropocentrism and biocentrism; future generations; deep and shallow ecology; and the possibility of a technological fix for environmental problems. Furthermore, an argument is provided that the established political ideologies should incorporate the instrumental value of nature into their own reasoning: it is in their own interests to ensure that people flourish as a precondition to their own ideologies flourishing! (p. 38). Some may argue that this is visiting too much foresight on those persons who may be attracted to becoming politicians.

The chapter continues by providing detailed descriptions of four ideologies, noting how they may accommodate environmental concerns. The four ideologies are *conservatism*, *liberalism*, *socialism* and *feminism*. Even accounting for the brief nature of this work, the inclusion of only four ideologies is possibly *too brief*. To explain, although the author notes that anarchist thought is potentially worth exploring, it remains unexplored (p. 39); furthermore, the reader could be made aware that promoters of ideologies ranging from libertarianism to communitarianism would feel that they could contribute to environmentalism in their own particular ways. After reading this book there remains the likelihood that many readers may not be aware of the existence of these other ideologies. In fact, the reader must wait for the third chapter before there is any mention of the more extreme ideologies, such as Earth First! and the Animal Liberation Front.

Now the third chapter entitled ‘Movements, parties, polices’, stays in the present and describes the ‘machinery’ of environmental politics (p. 46). In particular, the chapter describes how green political parties have formed in the industrialised nations, how they have fared and the problems they face. The chapter then finishes by noting the ‘tools’ governments have to encourage environmental policies such as providing information to the populace, passing legislation and enforcing taxation (pp. 69–77).

Staying in the present age, the fourth chapter entitled ‘Local and global, North and South’ introduces a theme of a north–south divide: whereby the *industrialised nations*, which largely lie in the north, are mainly responsible for polluting the planet; and the *developing nations*, which largely lie in the south, suffer from global warming which has been imposed upon them (pp. 80–81). The chapter continues by providing a convenient summary of the most important international environmental conferences.

Another useful device is provided by contrasting two global environmental problems. One is that of tackling the depletion of the ozone layer which has been described as a ‘relative success’ (p. 87), whilst the second, the tackling of the problem of global warming has been described as a ‘relative failure’ (p. 90). The success story has been achieved by replacing damaging chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) with hydrofluorocarbons (HFCs): but if it is accepted that HFCs contribute to global warming then this is merely a pyrrhic victory; as the problem of ozone depletion has been replaced by additions to global warming. With regards to the failure to stop global warming, Dobson notes a variety of factors conspiring to preclude success; and apart from the aforementioned theme that environmentalism limits economic growth, these include difficulties in gaining international agreements and disputes over scientific data. However, at the time of writing, amendments were announced to the agreement limiting CFC usage (the Montreal Protocol) whereby at least 150 nations have now agreed to eventually abolish the use of HFCs; hence, future editions of this book may be

able to upgrade the tackling of the damage to the ozone layer as a ‘success’ and the tackling of global warming as a ‘cause for hope’.

Chapter 5 moves forward in time and describes ‘Environmental futures’. The chapter starts by noting how environmental politics must take a long term view and ties this in to mentioning the geological period many believe that we are now living in, namely the anthropocene; a geological period defined by humanity’s actions altering the climate for future millennia (pp. 108–9). Now, the existence of a new geological period is plausible but humanity may become extinct before the existence of the anthropocene can be empirically proved. More helpful in the immediate future is the potentially attainable idea of ‘contraction and convergence’ whereby the wealthy societies contract their economies and the poorer societies sustainably develop theirs, so all economies converge (p. 110).

Although the chapter provides a definition of ‘degrowth’ (pp. 113–14), whereby production and consumption are reduced, this final chapter would benefit, I feel, by providing more examples of mechanisms whereby ‘contraction and convergence’ may occur. I suggest that a study of renewable energy could satisfy this purpose by making two points. Firstly, the book notes that it is ‘unclear’ whether renewables can power western lifestyles (p. 11); and that there is no ‘ready substitute for fossil fuels’ (p. 98). Here, Dobson could have argued that, if we accept that conventional fuels share a commonality in that they are finite, then carbon-based fuels and even nuclear power will eventually deplete. Hence, we must move to renewable energy and western lifestyles will ultimately adapt to the energy available and contract. The second point concerns convergence. Although it has been noted that conventional politics eschews environmentalism, as a restraint on economic growth (pp. 116–17): economic growth is possible by introducing renewable energy; certainly, this is true for the impoverished economies that lie in the tropics where they generally receive greater amounts of solar energy. Now, if such economies can generate more energy than they do

presently then they should materially grow and convergence should be realised. Admittedly, this may take a transfer of goods from the developed world but the transfer is bound to pay dividends where such economies have plentiful supplies of renewable energy. Moreover, the process of transfer is already underway; doubters can search the internet to better understand Costa Rica's embracement of harnessing technology or the increasing amounts of solar powered devices in sub-Saharan Africa.

In concluding, if you are embarking upon a course of environmental study or you are an educated person who needs a crash course in environmental politics, then make no mistake, this is definitely the book for you. However, with quite recent developments in renewable energy, combined with greater controls exercised over greenhouse gases, further editions of this book may need future-proofing.

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