SOCIAL THEORY AND THE ENVIRONMENT

DAVID GOLDBLATT
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Polity Press
Everybody talking bout protecting de planet
As if we jus cum on it
It hard fe understan it.
Everybody taking bout de green revolution
Protecting de children and fighting pollution
But check – capitalism an greed as caused us to need
Clean air to breathe, Yes

... 

*From Benjamin Zephaniah, 'Me green poem'*
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Preface

It has become a truism to say that in the final decades of the twentieth century we stand on the verge of all-consuming environmental disaster. Nevertheless, there are voices on either side of this position. In the doubters' corner the argument runs that this claim is a massive overestimation of the likely course of events; that the scientific evidence on which such judgements are based is of such doubtful accuracy that all announcements of apocalyptic change should be rejected. In the doomsayers' corner the argument runs that we have already passed the point of no return. The cumulative consequences of a century and a half of economic expansion have already sealed the fate of the global environment, though its sharpest consequences have yet to appear. This book is written from the middling position. On the one hand, I accept with some reservations and a healthy scepticism the mainstream scientific and ecological arguments about contemporary environmental change: that it is widespread, worsening and likely to be extremely serious locally and globally. On the other hand, I don't accept -- and this is I suppose an article of faith -- that we have crossed over into an unstoppable cycle of environmental decline and social dislocation. But we are probably closer than we think. It is with the mixture of hope and urgency generated by this position that I have tried to write this book.

It stands as an interrogation of the study of environmental degradation and environmental politics in four of the most significant contemporary European social theorists: Anthony Giddens, André Gorz, Jürgen Habermas and Ulrich Beck. Very simply, I have tried to ask and answer the following questions. What are the social and structural origins of environmental degradation in modern societies? What are the structural origins of environmental movements? What role can an environmentally orientated politics play in curbing and curtailing environmental degradation? I have also tried to think about some of the parameters of a successful environmental politics and its relationship to the traditions of socialist political theory. Anyone wanting an introduction to the engagement of social theory with environmental issues or a more detailed interpretation of the writings of Giddens, Gorz, Habermas or Beck can profitably use all of, some of, or just one of the central five chapters. Although the arguments of one chapter are often carried across into other chapters, I believe
that these studies can stand by themselves. In addition, I hope that beneath the studiousness of the text there is a core series of overlapping arguments that run from the introduction to the conclusion – arguments that are not merely scholastic but political and moral.

Social theory in its most illuminating moments has sought to span the difficult divide between the mere description and explanation of modernity, and an assessment of the moral dilemmas that face us and the political resources available to us to tackle them. Contemporary forms of environmental degradation present one of the most, if not the most, complex and catastrophic dilemmas of modernity. If social theory can make a small contribution to illuminating those dilemmas and sketching the contours of a moral and political response then it will have served us well.
Acknowledgements

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Introduction:
Social Theory, Environmental Degradation and Environmental Politics

This book explores the contribution of some contemporary social theorists to two issues: the origins and consequences of environmental degradation in modern societies, and the conditions under which political forces can be successfully mobilized against environmental degradation. With regard to the first issue it is hardly contentious to argue that economic and demographic change are significant causes of environmental degradation. However, it is worth exploring the precise mechanisms set in motion by these forces in more detail than is often attempted. In addition to considering these well-worn paths of explanation, I shall also examine the dual role of political and cultural power in fostering environmental degradation and, on rare occasions, in curtailing it. The emergence of political movements that seek to curtail environmental damage is one of the most significant consequences of modern environmental degradation. Whether such movements can fulfil their political vocation is another question. I plan to consider these questions through an examination of the work of four contemporary social theorists: Anthony Giddens, André Gorz, Jürgen Habermas and Ulrich Beck.

There are good reasons for being wary of this approach. First, the theoretical legacy left to us by classical social theory has some substantial limitations both for examining the relationships between societies and their environments, and for exploring the origins of a politics of the environment. Second, the study of the relationship between the environment and human societies is necessarily an interdisciplinary affair; to rely on a single discipline, however rich or diverse, would be profoundly limiting. Third, the four writers on whom I have focused are not the only contemporary theorists who have turned their attention to the relationship between the social and the natural, or to the rise and prospects of environmental social movements. In defence of this approach, I accept that the nineteenth-century foundations of contemporary social theory offer rather limited help in answering my questions, and that in any case we shall have to draw on other disciplines. None the less, in this introduction I
intend to examine, albeit briefly, the legacy of classical social theory and in particular the work of Karl Marx, Max Weber and Émile Durkheim. In doing so, I want to suggest that, despite substantial problems, contemporary social theory retains some purchase on my concerns.

**Marx, Weber and Durkheim on Environments and Societies**

The idea of social theory is not a simple one. There are those more empirically inclined sociologists who see it as the abstract musings of theorists disengaged from the sobering consequences of detailed empirical research and low-level theory building. Social theory has aimed higher, but only because it has cast off the necessary ballast of carefully framed and testable hypotheses and the detailed collection of epistemologically sound data. I share some of those doubts about social theory as an enterprise. However, I do believe that it occupies a distinct, important and valid space in the spectrum of sociological methods and conjectures. At the very broadest level, the investigation of the historical origins, institutional structures and dominant trajectories of change of modern societies have given social theory its disciplinary raison d'être and separated it by theme, if not always by method, from other sociological enterprises. For this reason, if no other, the vocabulary of nineteenth-century social theory will shape any inquiry into contemporary environmental degradation. The strengths of that vocabulary are diminished by the limited interest social theory displayed in the relationship between human societies and their natural environments and its antiquated understanding of it. That misunderstanding is not contingent but in many ways inscribed within the conceptual structure of the discipline. Ted Benton has argued (of sociology in general, rather than just social theory) that the way in which sociology came to define itself, especially in relation to potentially competing disciplines such as biology and psychology, effectively excluded or forced to the margins of the discipline . . . questions about the relations between society and its "natural" or "material" substrate.²

However, this is only true of the second wave of classical social theory. In the first half of the nineteenth century both Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer considered sociology to be epistemologically and ontologically dependent on, or subordinate to, biology. Comte drew on biological analogies and metaphors of form and function and the relationship between organism and organs to explore the interrelationship of individuals and institutions in modern societies, while Spencer's work was the first of many attempts to marry Darwinian models of evolution, selection and change to social development.³ More concretely the work of the classical political economists returned again and again to the relationship between the natural environment and the human economic prospect. Malthus, most obviously, inquired into the social consequences of rapid population growth in the context of limited environmental resources with
which to feed that population. Both David Ricardo and John Stuart Mill explored the potential limits to growth in an expanding but essentially agrarian economy; and they both concluded, though by different argumentative roots, that the explosive growth of the early nineteenth century would eventually reach both natural and economic limits of exhausted soil and declining rates of return.

By the third quarter of the nineteenth century the explosive pace of Western industrialization had rendered the gloomy prognosis of both Malthusian demographics and Ricardian agrarian economics redundant; population growth continued unabated at historically high rates, while agrarian productivity continued to rise and formed a diminishing role in a much broader process of economic growth. It is therefore no surprise that those early attempts to engage with the social and economic origins and consequences of environmental change were bypassed. In Marx’s work, where one might have expected such an engagement, the dynamic of capitalist industrialization shifted agricultural economics to the margins. In any case, a more pressing issue for sociology was always going to be its supposed dependence on or subordination to the natural sciences in general and biology in particular. If sociology was to emerge as a distinctive body of knowledge, then its subject matter – society – would have to be cordoned off from the realm of biology and nature. This was precisely the thrust of both Durkheim’s and Weber’s methodological arguments, which rejected all forms of biological determinism.

Of the classical trinity, Weber’s work conducts the most limited engagement with the natural world. There are some reflections on the environmental origins and implications of nomadism in his study of Judaism. Yet his historical investigations of antiquity, despite the centrality of agrarian production in his work, yielded little direct study of the historical impact and social implications of differing natural environments. A brief note on the importance of rivers and water transport is overshadowed by detailed discussion of patterns of land ownership and the dynamics of the slave mode of production. His studies of China and India are no more environmentally informed. Weber’s theoretical reflections on the matter are equally cursory. Indeed the only relevant discussion appears in a few brief paragraphs in the opening chapter of Economy and Society. Weber’s main concern is to deny the relevance of psychological and physiological explanations in sociology. None the less, he does argue that ‘in all the sciences of human action, account must be taken of processes and phenomena which are devoid of subjective meaning . . . favouring or hindering circumstances.’ In other words, non-human, unintended processes, such as climate, are of significance if they affect human action. This is, however, hardly saying much.

Given that economics and demographics are obvious points of interaction between societies and their environment, the reasons for the greater environmental sensibilities of Marx’s and Durkheim’s work should be clear. Durkheim, in taking population density and its relationship with
material resources to be the driving force behind the evolutionary stratification of human societies, made the natural world a decisive causal factor in human history. Marx had acquired a persistent concern with the notion of the natural from his study of Hegel. However, it is not his discussions of human nature and species being, but his material understanding of human labour that concerns us. Like Durkheim, Marx placed the economic interface of human societies and the natural world at the centre of historical change. By contrast, Weber never gave demographics a central causal role in history, while his theory of economic action significantly differs from Marx. Weber defined action by reference to the ideal type of purposive rational action. Therefore the relationship between means and ends was more significant than the ontological relation between human subject and natural object. In any case, whereas Marx defined economics in terms of production and the transformation of the natural world, Weber understood it primarily in terms of peaceful exchange.

Even so, the work of Marx and Durkheim is, at best, of limited use to us. First, because their theoretical framework for examining the relationship between societies and environments is too unspecific for our purposes. Their understanding of the natural environment was always constrained by their limited knowledge of biology. Or rather, their work was constrained by the limited knowledge and scope of biology itself. This is not of course to suggest that their work was ignorant of contemporary biology; in fact, their work is rich in biological metaphors. Rather it is to suggest that the internal dynamics of the natural world and the precise impacts of different economic and demographic processes on human physiology and ecosystems alike had yet to be registered. Ecology, toxicology, climatology and epidemiology remained in their infancy and were overshadowed by the contemporary intellectual dominance of evolutionary theory. Second, the primary ecological issue for classical social theory was not the origins of contemporary environmental degradation, but how premodern societies had been held in check by their natural environments, and how it was that modern societies had come to transcend those limits or had separated themselves in some sense from their 'natural' origins. It is that dynamic in the modernization process that Ferdinand Tönnies captured in his description of the transition between gemeinschaft and gesellschaft.

In retrospect the mid-nineteenth to early twentieth centuries appear as an ambiguous moment in the ecological history of modern societies. Durkheim explained the emergence of modernity and its unique economic and social capacities in terms of a progressive division of labour and political stratification, in which individuals and societies could find their competitive niche; population and resource pressures spurred the technological innovation and social differentiation on which modern industrial society was built. Once stratified it was the abnormal forms of the division of labour that upset the balance of modern societies rather than natural resource constraints. Marx never allotted such a prominent causal role to
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demographics. However, as we know, he did focus on the sociology of production. Human beings, in pursuing their needs through collective labour, transformed both their environment and their forms of social organization. It was this, and the successive modes of production generated, that led to an irrepressible dynamic of economic development and the transformation of the material world. With the advent of capitalism and industrial technology, that dynamic would prove capable of generating the material abundance on which an advanced form of social organization could be based. Modern societies were indeed unconstrained by natural limits. Nor did it seem at the time that the economic capacity of capitalism would prove to be environmentally problematic in any fundamental way.

That said, it was becoming clear to some observers that the socialized nature created by modernity was beginning to reimpuse itself on human societies. Engels, as early as the 1840s, found the urban environment to be aesthetically repugnant and an active contributor to the misery of the poor. Marx himself was aware of the capacity of capitalism to undermine soil fertility and abuse natural resources. But these reflections have only derived significance in retrospect. They are at best illuminating asides rather than core areas of concern or investigation to Marx and Engels. Thus the classical social theorists were historically late enough to witness not simply the escape of modern societies from their organic constraints, but also their dynamic capacity to transform the natural world as well. Yet they were too early to register fully the implications of those transformations; far from transcending ecological constraints, modern societies were rapidly acquiring new ones of their own making.

This rather limited legacy in terms of focus and theoretical argument is responsible, at least in part, for the equally thin record of environmental concerns in the mainstream sociological theory of the early and mid-twentieth centuries. Among the many traditions of interpretive sociology, the absence of environmental concerns is hardly surprising. Such resolutely idealist models of social relations and social action were unlikely to engage with the underlying material substrate of modern societies. More surprising is the absence of any sustained engagement of either Marxism or functionalism with the natural environment. For all Marx’s historical limitations he clearly laid down a possible theoretical agenda and a set of conceptual tools for interrogating the society-environment relationship. Of course, the notion of nature recurs throughout the writings of both classical and Western Marxists but it is invariably a purely philosophical construct. On the theoretical side only Jean-Paul Sartre makes passing reference to the environmental transformations through his painful neologism – the practico-inert.15 On the historical side the lone figure of Karl Wittfogel stands out, arguing that Marx’s model of the static Asiatic mode of production could be explained in terms of the centralized control of water resources by oriental states in areas of hydrological scarcity.16 The work of Talcott Parsons – the epitome of twentieth-century functionalism – displays a similar gap between potential and performance. At the very
core of Parsons's work is a conception of human beings and human societies bounded by an external natural environment. Alongside this static model of human societies, Parsons proposed a model of social evolution in which societies continually responded to the limits set by their natural environment, evolving in complexity and capacity so as to transcend those limits. Yet such was the abstraction of the Parsonian model that his conception of the natural environment remained as empty as the diagrammatic boxes he deployed to describe it.19

**Contemporary Social Theory, Environmental Degradation and the Work of Giddens and Gorz**

The limitations of classical social theory for our purposes are, first, that it does not possess an adequate conceptual framework with which to understand the complex interactions between societies and environments, and second, that where it has addressed such issues it has focused on the ways in which human societies have transformed their environment without attending to the negative consequences of those transformations in any sustained fashion.

In dealing with the first of those limitations, it is to the methods and perspectives of environmental history that I shall initially turn.18 In its broadest sense, the discipline of environmental history has set out to investigate the ways in which the natural environment has constituted a causally significant factor in the shaping of the historical process. It is this focus that makes it a more suitable resource for my purposes than social theory, which has tended to explore the interaction of the social and the natural in terms of gender, the body, sexuality, etc.19 Environmental history has been supplemented by other disciplines: anthropology, demography and geography, and not least by advances within the discipline of ecology itself.20 Most importantly, the static concept of an unchanging, if internally organized, natural world in nineteenth-century biology was successively transformed by the concept of the dynamic ecosystem.21 As a consequence, historians have learnt to view the natural world as a complex system of interactions between communities of flora and fauna, micro-organisms, soil, water and climate, and to trace each of these variables across entire ecosystems and societies.22 As a discipline, environmental history has, perhaps paradoxically, yet to tackle its most pressing contemporary concern: the origins and consequences of environmental degradation in the modern world. Perhaps the focus of environmental history on agricultural societies, where the level of environmental degradation is more muted, may explain this. But it must be, at least in part, the very enormity and complexity of such a historical process that has discouraged the painstaking task of empirical reconstruction. It is because of that enormity and complexity that social theory comes into its own. We may have abandoned classical social theory's understanding of society
and environments, but we cannot abandon its unique capacity for making explicable the complex, large-scale processes that have produced and organized modern societies.23

Among contemporary social theorists and historical sociologists the constraints which the natural world applies to human societies have been reinvestigated with a new vigour and a more sensitive ecological eye.24 However, less attention has been paid to the origins and consequences of environmental degradation in modern societies. It is for this reason, first and foremost, that I have chosen to interrogate the works of Giddens and Gorz. Both writers have attempted to integrate an explanation of the origins and consequences of environmental degradation into a broader understanding of the development and dynamics of modern societies.25

There are, however, additional reasons for analysing the work of these two theorists. In Giddens's case the first reason is that his explanation of environmental degradation focuses on the interaction between capitalism and industrialism. I shall argue in chapter 1 that this provides a powerful, if incomplete, starting point from which to explain the origins of environmental degradation. Second, Giddens's social theory has paid particular attention to the spatial dimension of social processes and the methods of geography. This has allowed him to investigate the sociological nature of urbanism and globalization and their contribution to environmental problems. In chapter 2, I shall argue that this enables us to extend considerably the scope of our understanding of environmental degradation. Third, Giddens's interpretative approach to social theory and the multicausal models of social processes he has developed have allowed me to incorporate in my study the contribution made by political power and cultural attitudes to the generation of environmental degradation. I shall therefore supplement and extend Giddens's work in both chapters. Finally, Giddens incorporates an explanation of the origins of environmental social movements into his broader social theory. Thus his work allows us to consider the dual qualities of cultural and political power: that they may both facilitate and control the process of environmental degradation.

The relevance of Gorz's work to our concerns is fourfold. First, his studies draw on the work of environmental economists, and show a sensitivity to the detailed dynamics of contemporary capitalist economies that Giddens's work does not display. Second, he explores mechanisms of environmental degradation that Giddens does not: the impact of modern consumption and the environmental impact of technologies. Third, he pays much closer attention than Giddens to the socioeconomic consequences of environmental degradation. This emphasis on Gorz's work will allow us to explore the ways in which the political and economic institutions of modern societies recognize and respond to the environmental degradation they have created. The most interesting aspect of Gorz's work is his reflections on socialism and the means by which cultural preferences and the demand for environmental sustainability can triumph over the dynamic of economic and political interests. I shall return
to this below. Before doing so I want briefly to explore the contribution of classical social theory to the explanation of political mobilization, the theory of socialism and the legacy that this has left for exploring the mobilization of environmental politics.

**Classical Social Theory: Politics, Culture and Socialism**

If classical social theory as we understand it is a limited tradition with which to understand environmental degradation, does it fare any better in explaining environmental politics? Marx, Weber and Durkheim lived just long enough to witness the negative impact of modern societies on their environments. However, they died too early to register the emergence of a politically significant environmental movement. Marx died just as environmental organizations were forming in Britain and the United States, for example the Sierra Club, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and the National Trust. In early twentieth-century France and Germany, other political conflicts dominated the landscape surveyed by Durkheim and Weber. None the less, these writers have left a substantial theoretical legacy on political mobilization. In their political sociology the classical social theorists all derive two basic mechanisms of political mobilization from their accounts of the institutional structures of modernity. First, they describe how the social structure of modern societies determines the economic and political interests of major social groups. Second, they all offer an account of the cultural development of modernity in which new types of knowledge and moral ideals are generated. These may well stand opposed to the structure of interests and the current dynamics of modern societies. Thus, in addition, they all reflected on the most significant oppositional politics in modern societies: the socialist movements of the West. These reflections provide a special connection to our concerns. I shall argue that, despite its obvious differences and distance, their debate over socialism remains significant for exploring the environmental movement and the transformations proposed by it. Before examining those connections I shall sketch the relevant outlines of the work of Marx, Weber and Durkheim.

Durkheim, viewing the long gestation of industrial society, found himself within a modernity as yet incomplete. An expanding and increasingly complicated division of labour characterized modern societies. In breaking with the segmental stratification of premodern societies, functional specialization yielded mixed political and cultural consequences. Extensive stratification should have generated a structure of interdependent interests in an increasingly complex world. Indeed, the need for solidarity was inscribed in the complex differentiation of modern societies, as specialization and diminishing economic and political self-sufficiency demanded increasing levels of co-operation. However, structurally generated interests were insufficient to maintain social solidarity. In opposition
to the political economists, Durkheim maintained that modern societies could not be reproduced simply by the exercise of self-interest in market exchange. Social solidarity required the rational intervention of collective agencies in societies and the moral regulation of a shared normative framework.

Thus Durkheim perceived two dimensions to the development of cultural modernity: the emergence of rational knowledge about the workings of the social world, and the creation of secular notions of justice and equality. Together, these cultural transformations would secure rational control over the world and underwrite the normative solidarity of modernity without stifling the creative dynamism and moral responsibility of individuals. This benign balance lay some way in the future. In the meantime, the abnormal forms of the division of labour generated structural differences in economic and political interests, producing political conflict rather than making the need for interdependent co-operation transparent. Moreover, modern societies had yet to establish a sufficiently sophisticated secular morality or the institutional mechanisms through which this could be actualized. Liberated from the oppressive uniformity of mechanical solidarity, the needs and desires of the modern individual had been set free without being bound to collective identities or systems of moral regulation; anomie and egoism followed. Despite the possibility, indeed necessity, of moral control over politics, opposing interests prevailed in political mobilization, and social dislocation followed. Durkheim understood socialism as an attempt to regulate the intrinsic inequalities and irregularities of an advanced economy. Socialism did not address, however, the question of moral regulation. Indeed it assumed that moral regulation was identical with economic equalization. Durkheim, by contrast, argued that occupational groupings were the most effective mechanisms for the representation of functionally differentiated interest groups to a benign state, and that secular education was the key to maintaining a morally informed social solidarity.

Marx, like Durkheim, recognized the dual role of interests and ideals in the mobilization of modern politics. However, the structural generation of opposing interests was not an abnormal form of the division of labour but inscribed in the basic economic structures of capitalist societies: the inequitable ownership of the means of production and the nature of the wage–labour contract. The moral regulation of an inherently unjust economic and political system was not countenanced. Moral arguments appeared as the ideological reflex and legitimation of structurally established interests. The significance of cultural change lay in that fact that the relentless transformation of the world by the dynamic of capital accumulation dispelled the rural idiocy and isolation of premodern, peasant life. It forcibly brought the industrial working classes face to face with the harsh realities of that dynamic, unfettered by the metaphysical illusions and religious ideologies that had bound their peasant ancestors to the dominant order. The significance then of Marx’s theory of socialism is that
the dynamic of a politics driven by interest and ruthlessly disclosed by
the pattern of cultural change would herald the creation of a society in
which significant differences of interest would be dissolved: it would see
the abolition of private property and the division of labour, and the disso-
lution of the state. Marx was able to achieve this sociological conjuring
trick by making the interests of the working class coincide with the inter-
est of humanity as a whole, and by assuming that the economic changes
he foresaw were compatible with the maintenance of an abundantly pro-
ductive modern industrial order. Thus sectional interests were trans-
formed into the common good. Justice would be secured by the inevitable
direction of history rather than by the cogency of its case or its capacity to
mobilize political action.

Weber found the elision between working-class interests and the com-
mon good, as well as the economic implications of socialism, to be rather
more problematic. According to Weber, politics was mobilized by struc-
turally generated economic and political interests. However, where Marx
saw only economic interests and ideological justifications of political posi-
tions, Weber asserted the centrality of cultural nationalism and value
choice in mobilizing modern politics. Weber, like Durkheim, argued that
cultural change could mobilize political action. However, the cultural
resources of modernity could not underwrite the sort of objective norma-
tive framework that Durkheim proposed. Irretrievably fragmented by
specialization and robbed of the universalizing powers of religious world-
views, modern culture could not rationally underwrite the common good,
and thus people could not rationally choose between different moral pos-
tions. Only the unique and particular shared bonds of language and eth-
nicity that motivated modern nationalisms could approximate to this. The
Durkheimian solution to the pathologies of modernity was therefore
blocked. Against Marx, Weber remained sceptical as to whether the exer-
cise of working-class self-interest could generate a society in which con-
licts of interest were dissolved. In the first place he put national interests
above class interests. But more significantly he argued that the mobiliza-
tion of class-based interests in modern nation-states inevitably resulted in
the bureaucratization of politics and political parties themselves. Bu-
eaucracies, like economic systems, did not respond to the calls of soli-
darity or justice but to the demands of interests, of power and of money.
In the context of an increasingly complex society and the establishment of
mass democracy, the bureaucratization of social institutions and political
organization were almost inevitable. The best resource that modern cul-
ture could make available to actors was the hope that a rational calcula-
tion of political circumstances might make moral choices and their
implementation rather clearer, while nationalism might provide a mecha-
nism for the enlightened redefinition of class interests.

What is the significance of these discussions? First, environmental poli-
tics is mobilized by both interests and ideals. The former might include
the threat of environmental damage and the threat of reduced profitability
or employment. Moral claims and ideals might include the rights of future over current generations or the irreducible value of all life-forms. Second, the interconnections drawn between interests and ideals, social structure and culture are important in explaining the trajectory of environmental politics, the fact that interests can ideologically shape moral claims, while the growth of knowledge and moral argument can lead to an enlightened redefinition of interests. Third, the discussions of socialism in classical social theory all share a similar problem: how can the dynamics of economic and political life, shaped and propelled by the exercise of power and the influence of interests, be brought into line with the moral perspectives of modern culture? To put it another way, how can culture and morality regulate or control economic and political systems? How can solidarity and justice prevail over power and money in the motivation of action? These problems also lie at the heart of environmental politics. If I am right in arguing in this book that economics, demographics and politics are the central causes of environmental degradation, then an environmentally orientated politics is necessarily concerned with their control or regulation. Rather than responding solely to the dictates of economic and political interests, the moral case for the preservation of the natural world and the enlightened self-interest of environmental sustainability must decisively figure in the exercise of economic and political power. Marx relied on the coincidence of interests and morality to solve the problem, Durkheim promised an evolutionary shift to a state-organized secular morality, and Weber gave up the chase altogether. He pleaded for the preservation of social practices as yet unengulfed by bureaucratic organization but could only find the demagogic force and moral will of plebiscitary leaders. In the late twentieth century, in the face of globally devastating environmental degradation, the first two solutions have been rendered unlikely, the third most unpalatable.

The Mobilization of Environmental Politics and the Work of Jürgen Habermas

For our purposes, there are two great strengths of classical social theory: its capacity to situate political mobilization in the context of the broader shifts and structures of modern societies, and its continuing attempt to understand the interplay of interest, ideals and cognitive understandings of the world in the mobilization of politics. However, an important argument, and one I shall return to on a number of occasions in this book, is that we shall not be able to grasp the dynamics of environmental politics until we have understood the causes and consequences of environmental degradation. Given the rather limited record of classical social theory in this area, and despite all the strengths I have outlined, its usefulness in examining environmental politics is necessarily restricted. In chapters 1 and 2, I shall begin to sketch the role of politics in facilitating and control-
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ling environmental degradation. In chapter 3, I shall develop a much fuller model of the interrelationship between economics and politics in the causes and consequences of environmental degradation. It is only on this basis that I shall begin to explore in detail the conditions under which an environmentally orientated politics is mobilized.

Thus, in chapter 4, in connection with the work of Habermas, I shall be ready to address the mobilization of environmental politics head on. Clearly, Habermas is not the only social theorist to consider this issue. However, there are a number of significant reasons for focusing on Habermas’s work. First, his recent work has provided one of the most thoroughgoing reassessments of classical social theory, and in so doing he has generated the most comprehensive reinterpretation of both the institutional organization of modernity and its cultural development. Second, he has used this framework to investigate the emergence of new social movements and to gauge their potential political significance. Third, he allows us to examine the ways in which changing social structures have produced a new organization of economic and political interests, and how these in turn shape the mobilization of contemporary environmental politics. Fourth, he allows us to examine the ways in which cultural change and modern moral knowledge about the environment have emerged, redefined interests and contributed to the emergence of environmentally orientated political movements. Fifth, in keeping with the interdisciplinary approach which I have advocated, Habermas’s work draws on and attempts to incorporate some of the most significant insights of political scientists who have investigated the structural origins of environmental politics.

Ulrich Beck, Environmental Politics and the Risk Society

Finally we come to the work of Ulrich Beck. What really distinguishes Beck’s work is that for him alone among contemporary social theorists the catastrophic potential of global environmental degradation occupies centre stage. Indeed Beck goes so far as to argue that the modernity described in the works of the classical social theorists is being transformed into a fundamentally different type of society – a risk society. That transformation is driven, in part, by the emergence of pervasive and historically unique levels of environmental danger and risk of such a magnitude and form that conventional models of modern society cannot capture their origins or consequences. In addition, the work of Ulrich Beck reconnects with issues raised in all the other chapters of this book, as well as posing questions and investigating issues that none of those touch on. In chapter 5, I will review Beck’s model of the risk society and explore its explicitly environmental dimension. His claims regarding the transformation of classical modernity into a risk society are closely paralleled by Giddens’s model of a radicalized late modernity in which environmental social
movements respond to newly perceived environmental risks and dangers. Beck also investigates the ways in which contemporary political and cultural power relations serve to obscure the origins of environmental degradation and protect the perpetrators of that degradation. His work, therefore, provides a useful supplement to the model of environmental politics and policy-making in Gorz's work. Finally, Beck like Habermas argues that democracy and democratization of both the conventional political process and the previously depoliticized areas of economic decision-making provide an essential element of an environmentally sustainable politics.

Socialism and Social Theory

I wrote above that I was concerned not only with the reasons for environmental degradation but with what, politically, we might do about it. The first five chapters of this book address some of the issues that this problem raises. We are unlikely to stem environmental degradation until we have a relatively accurate understanding of how and why it occurs. Similarly, once we have grasped this, we are unlikely to be able to intervene politically unless we understand the conditions under which environmental politics has been successfully mobilized and the constraints under which that mobilization operates. One constraint under which any politics operates is the requirement that the economic and political alternatives it offers have some plausibility and attractiveness. Thus I shall address the issue of socialism and environmental politics in the conclusion. All four of the theorists that I am analysing have built on the collective insight of the classical social theorists – that socialism entails the regulation of economic and political power in accordance with cultural and moral ideals. Moreover, each has done so from a perspective that acknowledges the limitations and failures of socialism as a political force and as a form of economic organization in the twentieth century. Their work therefore retains a significance for the dilemmas that face both a socialist and an environmental politics. In the conclusion I shall assess their proposals and draw up a balance sheet of the contributions of these contemporary social theorists to the questions I have asked, questions that classical social theory, for all its strengths, left unanswered.