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The Politics Of The Earth: Environmental Discourses



Synopsis

The Politics of the Earth: Environmental Discourses, Third Edition, provides an accessible introduction to environmental politics by examining the ways in which people use language to discuss environmental issues. Leading scholar John S. Dryzek analyzes the various approaches that have dominated the field over the last three decades--approaches that are also likely to be influential in the future--including survivalism, environmental problem-solving, sustainability, and green radicalism. Dryzek examines and assesses the history, interplay, and impact of these perspectives, concluding with a plea for ecological democracy. An engaging writing style and helpful boxed material make this complex subject more understandable to students.

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Customer Reviews

John S. Dryzek is Professor of Political Science and Australian Research Council Federation Fellow at the Australian National University. He is a Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences in Australia, former Head of the Departments of Political Science at the Universities of Oregon and Melbourne and the Social and Political Theory program at ANU, and former editor of the Australian Journal of Political Science.

Important to understand the different approaches and discourses around sustainable development..

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This well-organized book, in cataloguing the different ways in which people think about the environment, shows why so many environmentalists talk at cross-purposes. I was drawn to this book because I was hoping to find something akin to the dialectical analysis of ideas performed by Mortimer J. Adler at the Institute for Philosophical Research in the 1950s and 60s, which resulted in such books as *The Idea of Freedom: A Dialectical Examination of the Conceptions of Freedom* and *The Idea of Justice*. The aim of these books was to elucidate, using a rigorous, impartial methodology, the discussion of the ideas in the history of Western thought. In order to expunge bias, these works were team efforts, and all the terminology adopted in them was carefully chosen so as not to favor any one strand of thought over any other. I was excited by the notion of finding something comparable which treated the idea of environmentalism as its subject. While *The Politics of the Earth* is not a dialectical analysis in that sense, it does organize the discussion of environmentalism by showing the various ways that the environment and environmentalism have been talked and written about. It turns out that the subject can be resolved into 9 separate "discourses." The author defines discourse as "a shared way of apprehending the world" that "enables those who subscribe to it to interpret bits of information and put them together into coherent stories or accounts. Each discourse rests on assumptions, judgments, and contentions that provide the basic terms for analysis, debates, agreements, and disagreements. . . . The way a discourse views the world is not always easily comprehended by those who subscribe to other discourses." The discourses are mostly very different from each other. Some address other discourses and some do not. Dryzek groups them into 4 categories: Global limits and their denial Solving environmental problems The quest for sustainability Green radicalism In the first category are two discourses. The first of these he calls Survivalism, which contends that global resources are finite and that human consumption of them will necessarily run into an absolute limit when they are exhausted. The result will be global disaster. The second discourse here he calls Prometheanism, and it consists of denying the Survivalist premise, holding instead that human ingenuity has always and will always surmount the problems it faces, including those problems caused by itself. The history of human development has been not one of increasing scarcity but of increasing abundance; this has been due to technology, which will press on. One of Dryzek's ways of showing evenhandedness toward the discourses is to break them all down in the same way, analyzing them briefly and examining

their features under a series of 4 headings. He even provides a little box of bullet-points for each discourse, summarizing its main tenets and allowing the reader to clearly grasp the differences between discourses. I loved this feature, really appreciated the author's clear organization of the subject matter. But a couple of things troubled me while reading the book. One was my own lack of clarity about what exactly a discourse is, at least as Dryzek uses the term. To me the word suggests above all a way of talking about a subject, in this case the environment. But it's clear that these discourses are not just ways of talking; they also imply or urge particular actions and policies. To the extent that they do this, I wondered whether the discourses might be the same as what I think of as ideologies. Robert Higgs, in his book *Crisis and Leviathan: Critical Episodes in the Growth of American Government*, spends a chapter discussing ideology, and contends that every ideology has 4 aspects: cognitive affective programmatic solidary. He goes on to say: "It structures a person's perceptions and predetermines his understandings of the social world, expressing these cognitions in characteristic symbols; it tells him whether what he 'sees' is good or bad or morally neutral; and it propels him to act in accordance with his cognitions and evaluations as a committed member of a political group in pursuit of definite social objectives. Ideology simplifies a reality too huge and complicated to be comprehended, evaluated, and dealt with in any purely factual, scientific, or other disinterested way." This is not a bad fit with Dryzek's environmental discourses. And in case you may think that Higgs has a negative view of ideology, here is his next paragraph: "Every sane adult has an ideology. Every ideology must deal in part with factual, scientific, and other 'hard' knowledge. To the extent that it makes assumptions or claims inconsistent with such well-confirmed, socially tested knowledge one may properly accuse it of 'distortion.' Some ideologies commit this sin more than others. But all contain unverified and unverifiable elements, including their fundamental commitments to certain values. These elements are neither true nor false." Perhaps here there is a parting of ways between Higgs's ideologies and Dryzek's discourses but I'm not sure. This point is surely important because if the discourses are fundamentally about values rather than facts, then it seems to me that the prospect of resolving environmental problems through any agreed program of action is dim. At the bottom of, say, the Promethean discourse, is there the 'fact' of the limitlessness of human ingenuity, or is there the 'value' that the human freedom to think and act must be held supreme above all else? Is it a question of knowledge, or a question of what we like? Another thing that bothered me sometimes was the

author's level of objectivity. In his introduction the author admits that he has views of his own concerning the environment, but postpones telling the reader what these are until the end of the book when he sums up. I would have preferred full disclosure at the beginning; this would have allowed me, as a reader, to adjust for his possible bias as he treated each of the discourses. As it was, I sensed the author's relative approval and disapproval through such things as ironic remarks made in the course of the analyses. In a thoroughgoing "dialectical" analysis of the kind done by the Institute for Philosophical Research, the terminology and the exposition are chosen carefully so that, ideally, each of the viewpoints is depicted in such a way that none of its own adherents would not object to the presentation. In such an approach, each of the discourses would be described almost as an advocate would do it, presenting its logical argument as forcefully as possible while leaving aside any emotional appeals. As I was taught while attending a Buddhist monastic college: "when presenting your opponent's case, try to make it sound stronger than your own. That's hard to do, and it's not what Dryzek was attempting in this book; but it's what I would have liked best. However, this book is still good, and the author has done a valuable service to environmentalism and to thought about public policy generally. I had found the various arguments and programs around the environment to be confusing and contradictory, and this book has gone a long way toward showing me exactly why. Now, when I hear or read anything about environmental problems and their solutions, I find myself classifying the arguments in terms of these discourses. My thinking about the subject is better organized, and I like that.

Thanks for everything! It worked out great.

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