

An Ecocentric Discussion on Green Theory in International Relations

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Abstract

Environmental degradation and its multidimensional impacts have become a topic of increasing interest in the International Relations (IR) discipline. Several IR theories examine environmental issues through different approaches, ranging from state-centric to human-centric. Green Theory in IR, rooted in the diversity of green political thought across the green spectrum, focuses directly on analyzing environmental issues. This study delves into the possibility of an ecocentric and holistic reframing of Green Theory in IR grounded in Eckersley's Green State, planetary approach, and critical problem-solving methodology through analytical eclecticism. We aim to discuss whether a well-defined Green Theory in IR can provide a comprehensive perspective for implementing more effective alternatives to polycrisis, especially to ecological crises. Therefore, we categorize the conceptual and theoretical diversity within green approaches to clarify the content of green ontology and examine the green critiques of IR. These clarifications nourish the discussion of an alternative green theoretical framework for IR within Green Theory, offering a fresh and holistic lens for reinterpreting Green IR Theory. This will allow us to understand the interdependence in the international system ecologically, analyze the causes and consequences of ecological problems, and identify alternative solutions.

Keywords: Green theory, critical problem-solving, ecocentrism, green state, planetary approach

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Introduction

Ecological degradation and environmental challenges, which have been on the international agenda since the 1970s, have significantly influenced the discipline of International Relations (IR). In the 21st century, the entangled polycrisis (Lawrence et al. 2022), at the nexus of political, economic, social, and ecological crises, has been challenging all human and ecological systems on Earth. As ecological problems, especially the climate crisis, have been

exacerbated, addressing them systematically through an IR lens becomes essential. In this regard, green ideas have been integrated into IR through the Green Theory framework, rooted in Political Science. Green Theory incorporates various perspectives. Considering this often overlapping but sometimes contradicting theoretical and conceptual diversity, it is necessary to clarify the interconnected framework of green ontology. The anthropocentrism-ecocentrism dichotomy becomes prominent in categorizing green thoughts. However, this study, which aims to reframe Green Theory in IR through a green ontology, instead uses the spectrum of green perspectives, from light to dark, to overcome the limits of binarism and categorize different green perspectives in IR. Hence, we can reinterpret the framework of Green Theory as an ecocentric and holistic¹ IR theory grounded in critical problem-solving methodology, Robin Eckersley's Green State, and planetary approach.

Critical problem-solving methodology is an emerging approach in the literature (Mahmoud et al. 2018; Eckersley 2018; Eckersley 2020). It combines Cox's (1981) distinction between problem-solving theory and critical theory, offering a blend of methodological and theoretical pluralism to address issues that require an interdisciplinary approach. Ecological challenges create complex crises at the nexus of local, national, and global problems; it seems necessary to question whether the critical problem-solving approach can offer a holistic perspective within Green Theory to address polycrisis. Therefore, this study focuses on reframing Green Theory in IR through analytical eclecticism, integrating the critical problem-solving methodology, the ecocentric ontology, the planetary approach, and the Green State. Eclecticism facilitates the development of arguments for the role by drawing on diverse approaches when the theoretical framework cannot account for the practice holistically. According to Sil and Katzenstein (2010: 412-414), analytic eclecticism is not an alternative model of research; rather, it ensures a pragmatist perspective to protect social scientists against "the risks of excessive reliance on a single analytic framework and the simplifying assumptions that come with it". In this respect, analytic eclecticism contributes to existing research traditions and approaches by problematizing complex phenomena encountered by practitioners and ordinary actors, phenomena that are often divided into more "narrowly circumscribed puzzles by adherents of research traditions" (Sil and Katzenstein 2010: 425-426). Eclecticism has the potential to enrich theoretical debate and clarify Green Theory's frame in IR. Especially postmodern or poststructuralist approaches in Green Political Theory oppose grand, universalizing meta-narratives rather than conventional forms of theorizing, but they deepen the critiques. Considering this, analytical eclecticism might help reconcile problem-solving and critical perspectives within Green Theory. In this context, reframing Green Theory in IR through a green eclecticism may reinterpret its potential contribution to addressing the growing, complex, multilayered, and multi-actor ecological crises and help generate effective solutions.

1 Holistic approach in ecology refers to the comprehensive analysis of ecological systems, as a whole, considering the complex interdependence and interactions between all (living and non-living) components of the ecosystem (Risser 1985: 414). This study aims to discuss the adaption of this perspective to the green studies in IR.

Environmental literature in IR has been expanding, but the studies are fragmented and disconnected, as we underscore in the following sections. Even though critical green approaches have significantly contributed to this discussion, there is still uncertainty about how ecological crises would be analyzed and whether a common ground for coping with these problems could be established. Bernstein (2024), for instance, underlines the necessity of an epistemological and ontological shift in IR for analyzing the transformation, especially in response to climate change. Therefore, clarifying the ontological roots of Green Theory and categorizing these approaches within the green spectrum in the first section would help to connect various approaches to one another. Moreover, we examine environmental approaches within IR, along with green critiques of the discipline and the state, and the potential for greening sovereignty and the state. Then, we categorize all green perspectives based on their ecological priorities and perspectives for change. Undoubtedly, some critical approaches foresee radical systemic transformations. Despite the importance of these perspectives, translating this transformation into concrete actions in the short term appears challenging. Additionally, the Green State perspective in Green Theory also provides an alternative for transforming one of the crucial actors in the global system. However, the Green State still contains ambiguities, considering the questions about who and how to green the state, and whether a synchronized greening could be achieved at a systemic level. Therefore, the study examines whether integrating the critical problem-solving and planetary approach into Green Theory can provide a comprehensive perspective that enables the development and implementation of effective alternatives for urgent and vital ecological issues.

Ontology of Green Thought

Academic studies on national and transboundary ecological issues gained attention in the 1960s and 1970s as environmental degradation became more visible and civil society pressure intensified. These developments stimulated the emergence of green discussions across multiple disciplines, Political Science, Public Administration, and IR, by highlighting the shortcomings of traditional, state-centered approaches to environmental concerns. From an IR perspective, the early phase of these debates was closely linked to problem-solving methodologies that primarily addressed ecological issues through state security and institutional responses. However, the growing link between economic development and ecological degradation has sparked political and economic debates about global inequality, particularly regarding distributive justice between the developed North and the developing South.

In this respect, Green Theory, defined as “a normative theoretical approach centered on the protection of the natural environment” (Humphrey 2010: 573), has provided a framework for shaping state behavior and policy choices within the international system. Differences in how far Green Theory extends this concern generate distinct conceptual dichotomies. Cox’s problem-solving and critical perspectives also introduce contrasts within both Political

Science and IR, further complicating the conceptual terrain. Approaching Green Theory from a critical problem-solving perspective requires a clear understanding of the internal debates within green thought, as well as how other IR theories have addressed ecological problems.

Green Politics: Anthropocentric or Ecocentric?

The Industrial Revolution was a turning point in the acceleration of ecological degradation and in the development of conservation policies. Approaches advocating environmental protection for human benefit and those defending nature's intrinsic value formed the main division in early green perspectives. On the one hand, the anthropocentric environmentalism, which Dobson (2007: 2-3) characterizes as a managerial approach, has viewed environmental destruction and degradation as threats to human welfare and excluded the interests of non-human entities (Lawson 2015). On the other hand, ecocentric or more inclusive "green" approaches that problematize the human-nature relationship have flourished.

To clarify these distinctions between anthropocentric and ecocentric approaches, or between environmentalism and ecologism in green debates, a categorization can be referred to: the distinction between shallow and deep ecology, first articulated by Arne Naess. While anthropocentric shallow ecology addresses only surface-level issues and seeks short-term, gradual solutions, more ecocentric deep ecology delves into the root causes of environmental problems and advocates for radical solutions (Naess 2005a; Naess 2005b; Humphrey 2010) by emphasizing symbiosis, egalitarianism, classlessness, and decentralization, all grounded in diversity and complexity (Naess 2005a).

Furthermore, another key distinction within Green Thought lies between survivalism and prometheanism. Survivalists argue that the planet has limits and warn that uncontrolled economic and population growth will lead to catastrophic consequences, including resource depletion and ecosystem collapse (Dryzek 2013). This pessimistic outlook emphasizes the unsustainability of current economic and social systems and calls for radical actions, such as abandoning growth. Such measures, however, face criticism for being heavily controlled by powerful governments, including scientists and elites. Prometheans, by contrast, adopt an optimistic perspective, rejecting the idea of planetary limits. Inspired by the Greek myth of Prometheus, who brought fire to humanity, prometheans emphasize human ingenuity and unlimited creativity. They argue that human intelligence and high-tech solutions are sufficiently resilient and sophisticated to address ecological challenges. Among prometheans, some advocate for state intervention to develop these solutions, while others, aligned with market-based ideologies, believe that market forces alone can effectively address environmental problems and remove their urgency (Dryzek 2013: 25–26).

Moreover, Alex Steffen (2009) offers another classification of environmental movements based on their strategic and ideological approaches. This spectrum includes Bright Green Environmentalism, Light Green Environmentalism, Dark Green Environmentalism, and

Grays. Grays reject the need for any action to address environmental problems, whether at the individual or community level. Light Greens focus on individual change, emphasizing lifestyle, behavioral, and consumption adjustments for large-scale transformations and sustainable living. Dark Greens advocate community-level change, promoting deindustrialization, local solutions, and a return to the land. In contrast, Bright Greens argue that sustainability strategies must ensure prosperity and well-being to be effective. They believe sustainable innovation offers the most effective path to enduring prosperity (Steffen 2009).² In contrast to the anti-modernism and anti-industrialism of Dark Greens, Bright Greens advocate paths such as technological and innovative solutions. This aligns them more closely with the Promethean perspective than with the pessimism of Survivalism (Lawson 2015).

The diversity within green approaches has led to ontological differences, mainly between anthropocentrism and ecocentrism. However, beyond this dichotomy, Green Thoughts need more analytical categorization to help reframe Green Theory. Before that, different approaches linking environmental issues to the international system, global environmental governance, inter-state and transnational relations, and the roles of both state and non-state actors in world politics should be assessed. The analysis of IR perspectives on the environment reveals their anthropocentric or ecocentric and problem-solving or critical orientations and facilitates their classification within the changing spectrum of green.

Ecological Problems in IR and Green Classification

Cox's (1981: 128–134) distinction between problem-solving and critical theories hinges on generating solutions to problems defined within the boundaries of a particular perspective and uncovering the origin and nature of that perspective. While this distinction may appear methodological, from positivism to postpositivism, Kurki and Wight (2013) argue that it is inherently political. Accordingly, Cox (1981: 129) criticizes problem-solving theories' claim to objectivity, ahistoricism, and their value-dependent assumptions regarding the given order and underlines the reflexivity of critical theories toward the potential for change in the existing system. The IR theories addressing ecological problems can be assessed based on the distinction between problem-solving and critical approaches. In the environmental context, IR approaches range from those addressing ecological problems within the existing system and human-centric paradigms to those advocating revolutionary transformations (Buhari Gülmez and Dikmen 2023). Begg (2000: 223) stresses the importance of bridging these two perspectives, understanding both, and reinforcing their intersection.

2 Lawson (2015) positions Bright Green Environmentalism as situated between the pragmatic reformism of Light Greens and the radical ecocentrism of Dark Greens. Although it maintains an anthropocentric orientation, Bright Green Environmentalism departs from what Dobson (2007) describes as a "managerial" or incremental, technocratic form of environmentalism by prioritizing broader systemic and societal transformation rather than limited pollution-management reforms, thereby going beyond the limited scope of Light Green Environmentalism.

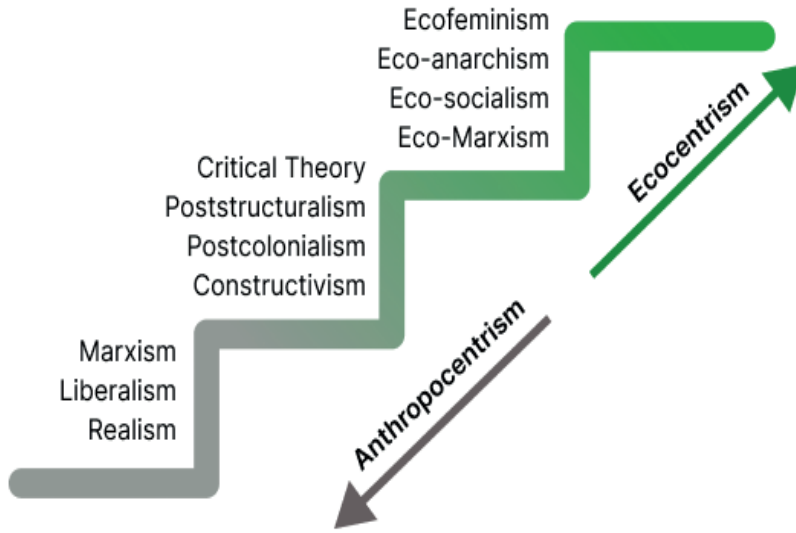
Realism, Liberalism, and Orthodox Marxism, classified as problem-solving theories, remain firmly anthropocentric in their treatment of ecological issues. Despite resting on entirely different arguments, these theories share a common ground: the instrumentalization of the environment within the current international system. Realism, as a state-centered approach, conceptualizes nature primarily as a strategic environment that can threaten or enhance state security (Walt 2021). In Liberal IR theory, the priority of environment is linked to human welfare and economic stability. The role of non-state actors, international organizations, regimes, and norms in international environmental cooperation prevails (Bernstein 2001; Young 2011). Orthodox Marxism, which privileges human emancipation over the integrity of ecosystems, integrates the critique of nature's exploitation and degradation into the critique of capitalism (Burkett 1999). These anthropocentric and positivist perspectives analyze the international character of environmental issues with different priorities. For instance, states' support for environmental policies or their entry into "green" alliances are recognized by the Realists in the context of relative gain if these measures strengthen states' position in the balance of power and international competition (Vanderheiden 2008; Heffron 2015). Liberal institutionalism, on the other hand, frames environmental problems as collective-action failures that can be addressed through appropriate institutional design, transparency, and incentive structures (Meadowcroft 2009; Tan Gülcan 2018). Marxist IR approaches analyze ecological problems through the lens of North–South inequalities, and environmental injustice in the context of international capital accumulation and global production chains (Foster and Magdoff 2011). Although this perspective more clearly and critically explores the structural causes of the ecological crisis and criticizes the existing international system than Realism or Liberalism, it remains in a problem-solving framework because of its positivist approach, addressing ecological transformation as a secondary aspect.

Moreover, whether the critical IR theories are ecocentric or more environmentally focused than problem-solving approaches should be questioned. Constructivist IR theory opens some space for questioning anthropocentrism by analyzing how "the environment" is socially constructed (Hyttén 2013). Critical Theory provides a more explicit critique of the domination of nature but mostly based on the anthropocentric and ecocentric dichotomy. Building on the Frankfurt School, it interprets ecological destruction as a manifestation of the Enlightenment's instrumental rationality, which turns both humans and non-human nature into objects of control (Adorno and Horkheimer 2016). Critical Theory links ecological crises to global inequalities and structural violence. It stresses how environmental harms disproportionately affect vulnerable communities and advocates for emancipation from oppression and socioeconomic injustice (McDonald 2012; Harrington and Lecavalier 2014). Poststructuralists deepen the critical perspective by deconstructing established categories such as security, development, and risk, and reveal how environmental policies often reproduce power relations and silence alternative voices. This line of critique has facilitated the emergence of a posthumanist green approach, which questions the centrality of the sovereign human subject (Herbrechter 2020). Postcolonial approaches extend this critique to the colonial and neocolonial dimensions of environmental governance. They expose how Western-centric ideas of development and

progress continue to shape the global distribution of ecological risks and benefits, and how resource extraction, land dispossession, and toxic dumping in postcolonial regions sustain patterns of racialized and spatialized injustice (Lewis and Maslin 2018; Bhambra and Newell 2022). Postcolonial theorists also highlight the epistemic violence involved in marginalizing indigenous ecological knowledges and attempt to amplify subaltern voices in climate and environmental politics (Siddiqi 2022). Although these critical approaches in IR put a more substantial and normative focus on ecological issues, the nature, ecosystems, and other species remain secondary compared to human communities' problems. These approaches problematize domination over nature and environmental injustices, yet the agency of nature or the value of ecosystems and non-human beings cannot be fully recognized.

However, feminist approaches, especially ecofeminism, fundamentally challenge anthropocentrism, despite feminism's individual focus. Ecofeminism argues that the domination of women and the domination of nature are interconnected through patriarchal and capitalist structures that historically constructed both as passive, exploitable "others" (Warren 2001; Shiva 2016; Woehrle 2022). By emphasizing embodied care, relationality, and interdependence, ecofeminists link ecological degradation to broader patterns of gendered, colonial, and class-based oppression, illustrating how environmental harms affect both human and non-human communities (Clark 2012; Buckingham 2015). Hence, they enrich green debates in IR by revealing how gendered hierarchies sustain anthropocentric worldviews and by advocating justice-oriented alternatives that treat the well-being of humans and the more-than-human world inseparably. Furthermore, other ecological approaches, such as eco-Marxism, eco-socialism, and eco-anarchism that seek to overcome the limitation of Marxism in terms of environmental issues, contribute to the ecocentric critiques of IR. They criticize the role of capitalism in ecological crises. Eco-Marxism highlights the metabolic rift (Foster, Clark and York 2010) between capitalist production and the conditions of ecological reproduction, and argues that averting ecological crises, including climate breakdown, requires systemic transformation rather than incremental reforms (Weston 2014; Clark et al. 2018). Eco-socialism mostly focuses on the importance of ecological consciousness, pluralist, democratic, and ethical green responses against state capitalism and highlights alternative production models (Kovel and Löwy 2001; Löwy 2005). Among these, eco-anarchism focuses particularly on social domination produced by the state and advocates for delegating political power to small, local communities and creating decentralized decision-making structures at local, regional, and international levels (Bookchin 2007). These ecocentric approaches can be considered as dark-green perspectives, even though they prioritize social emancipation and material justice. Ecofeminism surpasses anthropocentrism in IR through an ecocentric ontology by recognizing the intrinsic value and agency of nature and non-human life.

Different environmental perspectives in IR theories can be categorized through the anthropocentrism-ecocentrism division or by varying shades of green. However, to avoid sharp dichotomies, we list the theoretical approaches from anthropocentric to ecocentric and display them on a green spectrum from lighter to darker in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Anthropocentric and Ecocentric Approaches to Ecological Problems

Source: Figure designed by authors.

Accordingly, both problem-solving and critical approaches in IR can be classified as anthropocentric, but their green perspectives differ. Critical approaches are categorized greener with their normative concerns but do not fully embrace an ecocentric perspective. Dark green approaches, which intersect with IR theories but remain rooted in green thought, emphasize decentralization, participatory democracy, self-sufficiency, alternative technologies, pacifism, egalitarianism, and internationalism (Carter 2003). The critiques developed by ecocentric approaches, directed at both the anthropocentric nature of the IR discipline and the state-centric political authority, are particularly significant. However, Eckersley (1992) contends that an ecocentric perspective capable of providing lasting solutions to ecological crises can only be achieved through a well-defined Green Political Theory. Therefore, it is necessary to delve into the green critique of IR, especially to its main concepts, to understand the limits of Green Theory.

Green Approaches to IR

Complex ecological crises are undoubtedly part of the IR discipline. However, different IR approaches spreading across the green spectrum have limits in responding to systemic ecological problems. Green Theory in IR emphasizes the need for a normative reconstruction process that integrates both theoretical and practical elements while criticizing mainstream IR approaches and actors (Eckersley 2006). In this regard, the dark green or ecocentric critiques towards the IR discipline are prominent. These critical approaches to IR, along with green transformation of the state and sovereignty as a potential alternative to overcome ecological crises, need further examination. We will also use this analysis to reinterpret the context of Green Theory in IR with an ecocentric and planetary perspective.

Ecocentric Critiques of IR

The green critiques of IR primarily come from posthumanist, historical materialist, and planetary approaches. They mostly problematize the Anthropocene,³ IR's anthropocentrism, and its insufficient responses to the human-nature relationship and human agency, environmental law, and the capitalist system. Despite their different priorities, they share the argument that IR, even as it expands its boundaries, struggles to develop diverse, meaningful, and adequate responses to the deepening structural ecological crisis and the associated risks and threats (Burke et al. 2016: 12-19).

In this context, posthumanists emphasize reexamining the human-nature relationship with an ecological and technological perspective. By rejecting humanism and anthropocentrism, which prioritize human beings and human reason as the measure of all things and the only agents capable of solving global problems, they advocate, from an ethical perspective, for adopting an inclusive view that values other beings and promotes fair and sustainable relationships across ecosystems (Keeling and Lehman 2018; Buran et al. 2021; Gorur and Dey 2023). Posthumanism offers significant critiques of both IR and planetary approaches on the basis of human agency. On the other hand, Historical Materialists propose an alternative point of view focusing on the impacts of capitalism (Erçandırlı 2021). Moore (2017: 594) argues that capitalism's rise cannot be reduced to economics alone and must be understood through the geographies of life. He introduces the term "Capitalocene" to emphasize the global capitalist expansion, rooted in European imperialism, that redefined time and space (Moore 2017: 600-606). Malm and Hornborg (2014) criticize the Anthropocene narrative for portraying humanity as a monolithic species exerting dominance over the Earth System while neglecting the social inequalities and power structures that drive ecological destruction. They argue that this narrative, grounded in the natural sciences but also applicable to IR, overlooks the historical processes and global power dynamics that shape human-environment interactions (Malm and Hornborg 2014: 62-64).

Burke et al. (2016) offer a related framework with their concept of "planetary politics", which transcends IR's anthropocentric focus. This approach intersects with fields such as political ecology, global environmental policy, posthuman philosophy, and Green Political Theory. The planetary perspective argues that the discipline of IR, evolving amidst crises and challenges, remains ill-equipped to provide comprehensive responses in the Anthropocene

3 The concept of the Anthropocene describes a geological era in which human activities have become the primary force shaping the climate and the Earth's ecosystems (Davies 2016; Crutzen 2002). The literature emphasizes that anthropogenic interventions have destabilized ecological balance and accelerated processes of possible "sixth mass extinction" (Barnosky et al. 2011; Grooten and Almond 2018). In the natural sciences, Ecology in particular, ecological balance represents the equilibrium in ecosystems, based on the stability and sustainability of interdependencies and relations among living kinds and between living and non-living entities (Holland 2012). Deterioration of the ecological balance by human pressure is assumed as the leading cause of ecological degradation. Seen this way, the Anthropocene is not an independent cause but reflects the planetary-scale impacts of long-standing human-centered worldviews and growth-focused socioeconomic systems. Therefore, addressing the challenges of the Anthropocene requires fundamental changes in human values, perspectives, and practices, along with a rethinking of the political, economic, and moral systems that shape these worldviews.

(Burke et al. 2016). In this context, Burke et al.'s (2016) study underscores the significance of planetary politics, advocating a holistic view of the interconnected systems that sustain life on Earth. The planetary approach identifies the international system with the biosphere, emphasizing complex interdependence, in which each element can influence others and potentially trigger unexpected effects. Legal frameworks and regulations traditionally designed to protect humans are reimagined to include all ecological systems and species in an integrated context, shifts the focus from mainstream IR concerns to ecocentric ecological security and environmental justice for all species. This approach entails an onto-political and interdisciplinary framework that incorporates the interplay between ontological conditions and political structures, emphasizing institutional accountability for the exploitation and degradation of nature on community, national, and regional scales (Burke et al. 2016: 13–22). Hence, planetary politics advocates planetary responsibility to challenge and decolonize the limited scope of anthropocentric approaches (Manners 2024).⁴

However, Historical Materialists particularly criticize the shallow historicization of the Anthropocene by the planetary perspective (Malm and Hornborg 2014). Posthumanists also direct their critiques by arguing that the planetary approach falls into the paradox of presenting humans as both agents of destruction and potential saviors (Chandler 2019). Echoing Cox's (1981) critique of traditional problem-solving approaches, posthumanists argue that planetary politics and similar frameworks replicate traditional liberal cosmopolitan views by attempting to preserve order and find solutions within the existing system (Chandler et al. 2017). They warn that depending on existing systemic components may lead to recreating the very structures they seek to change. Burke et al. (2016) respond to these critiques by clarifying that planetary politics does not center on human agency but rather embraces the multiple agencies of the world and its interconnected systems. They emphasize that planetary politics addresses global inequalities through mechanisms incorporated into it. While acknowledging the role of international law in ecological crises, they stress the need to reform it to address environmental challenges effectively. Moreover, the planetary perspective criticizes Chandler et al.'s (2017) "bottom-up" politics by arguing that such approaches are insufficient in a context where global corporations and structures disregard democratic values and where environmental defenders face violence. They advocate for ecological struggle across multiple scales, integrating governance, destruction, regulation, and resistance to uphold the rule of law and ensure fair trials in the application of international law (Fishel et al. 2018). These green critiques to IR and anthropocentrism put the lens on system, structure, and mechanisms through a macro-level analysis. We will examine further critiques of the state and sovereignty-based studies in the next section.

4 Additionally, they contest the "Capitalocene" framework, arguing that it oversimplifies the drivers of ecological crises and obscures the responsibilities of such actors, including consumers and defense industries. These critiques focus on the role of overconsumption and consumerism in ecological degradation and emphasize the impact of the military, defense industry, and armed conflicts/wars on destroying nature and natural integrity. While recognizing capitalism's central role in the Anthropocene, they remind us that human-induced ecological destruction predates capitalism (Fishel et al. 2018). Historical accounts show that ecological crises have impacted different regions at different periods, exacerbated by the acceleration of production and population growth under capitalism (Diamond 2005; Ponting 2007; Floyd and Matthew 2013).

Greening the State and Sovereignty

Despite the diversity of actors in 21st-century international politics, numerous complex challenges, including the ecological crisis, still require states' responsibility and actions. However, the transformation of states through neoliberal policies has shifted public policies on social welfare and ecological sustainability, and prioritized privatization and profit-oriented economic growth. This shift has expanded the scope of corporate action, often with state incentives and permits, while reducing public expenditures in critical areas such as environmental protection and renewable energy, thereby deepening ecological crises, particularly the climate crisis (Chomsky et al. 2020). Nevertheless, the state remains the key actor capable of taking coercive measures against complex crises in an interdependent system. Within Green approaches, debates about the role of the state revolve around two opposing perspectives: those that underline the state's role as an efficient policymaker and those that reject it and call for its elimination. The Green State approach in Green Theory offers an alternative perspective, envisioning the transformation of the state and sovereignty.

Green Theory underscores the importance of innovative thinking that transcends the intellectual limits of the state-centered system to address current ecological challenges (Dalby 2016: 52). One such innovation is the greening of sovereignty, which proposes new models of governance and cooperation as alternatives to traditional notions of state sovereignty. These models aim to facilitate international cooperation, essential for tackling ecological issues that cross borders, and to develop global norms and governance mechanisms. Litfin (1998) suggests that the greening of sovereignty does not signify the end of state sovereignty but rather its restructuring by including responsibilities toward other states and the environment. Similarly, Eckersley (1992) argues for a transformative approach to sovereignty, envisioning states as emancipatory and ecocentric entities with political and economic power distributed across local communities, with equitable wealth sharing, and increased controls over market activities. Elliott (2004) points out that although states often prioritize their interests or those of economic elites, they remain pivotal instruments for challenging institutional interests. Even when bound by international environmental agreements perceived as constraints, states retain the power to implement them (Elliott 2004: 111). Democratically functioning states, along with institutional and social actors, have the greatest capacity and legitimacy to support the greening of sovereignty and the transition to a Green State (Lawson 2015).

Eckersley (2004) argues in her book, *The Green State*, that green transformation relies on the state's capacity to effect sweeping changes in economies and societies rather than revolutionary change. States, whether their actions lead to catastrophe or progress, play crucial roles in structuring individual opportunities, distributing wealth and risks, and safeguarding civil and political rights. While state power is traditionally linked to its monopoly on legitimate violence, from a normative perspective, this power can be directed toward virtuous goals, such as protecting human rights and the environment (Eckersley 2004). Paterson, Doran and Barry (2006) indeed emphasize that the state's role in addressing environmental crises depends on its structure. Decentralized, democratized, and less growth-dependent states can form

the foundation of a sustainable, just, and democratic Green State, supported by active green citizenship. According to Eckersley (2004), active ecological citizens resist state actions that cause ecological destruction and work to reshape the state to prioritize ecological sustainability and social justice. She notes that the internalization of ecological concerns and the global adoption of active ecological citizenship can guarantee the implementation of democratic processes. On the basis of this argument, the Green State approach can be placed at a central position on the green spectrum between light and dark greens.

The Green State represents an “ideal” ecological model, moving beyond democratic capitalist systems and embodying ecological democracy in its regulatory ideals and procedures (Eckersley 2020). While liberal democracy is not entirely dismissed, an immanent critique envisions restructuring a democratic postliberal state guided by ecological principles. This renewed democratic framework aims to develop flexible relationships between the state and the people through participatory and deliberative processes, transforming political representation and decision-making rules. Eckersley (2004) also emphasizes the transnational role of the Green State, whose responsibility extends beyond its own citizens to other communities. This responsibility is rooted in gradual, experimental, and consensual approaches rather than in cosmopolitan democracy. The transnational perspective aligns with good governance practices, decentralizing and democratizing global governance while expanding state sovereignty and accountability to encompass the entire planet (Elliott 2004: 111).

The Green State is one of the holistic and inclusive perspectives in response to escalating ecological crises (Arı and Gökpınar 2020), advocating for bottom-up and top-down transformations in mutual interaction. Eckersley (2020) highlights the capacity of states to manage sociotechnical transitions across sectors such as water, food, transportation, energy, and housing at local and national levels, facilitating broader societal transformations. However, ecological rights defenders, particularly in the Global South, continue to face increasing challenges, including violent interventions (Global Witness 2023). Furthermore, the rise of authoritarian political movements and right-wing populist governments poses crucial challenges for ecological approaches, the Green State arguments, and democracy as well (Youngs 2024). These challenges have intersected with deepening inequalities and injustices, strengthened anti-scientific assumptions, underestimated the impacts of ecological crises (even denying the reality of climate change), weakened the rule of law, restricted opposition, civil participation, and social mobilization, and slowed down international cooperation (Middledorp and Le Billon 2019; McCarthy 2019; Schwiertz et al. 2025). Given this context, the uncertainty remains about how the transformation of the state and the greening of the international system will be realized.

Green social movements can be seen as an alternative exit strategy for advancing democracy, improving ecological provisions and rights, and transforming the state and the global system. However, the impact of social movements is still limited due to several interlinked problems, such as the repression of social protests (not only in authoritarian but also in democratic states), the divisions between ecological movements, alternative popular

movements influenced by fake news or conspiracy theories, the lack of a concrete alternative design of the system and its actors' roles, or increasing power of economic actors on polity and knowledge (Dietz and Garrelts 2014; Bjork-James et al. 2022; Bosetti et al. 2025). Additionally, even if a synchronized, transnational movement supported by horizontal local links could be established, the question of how these links might achieve a green transformation remains difficult to answer. The transformation of the state and the role of social movements in this process need further analysis, which could be the topic of new studies. However, reinterpreting Green Theory from an ecocentric and planetary perspective with a critical problem-solving approach in this study might be a key to offering a normative framework for broader analyses.

Reframing Green Theory in IR

States play a dual role in the polycrisis: they are both contributors and key powerful actors who make decisions and implement them to address the intertwined crises. The capitalist state model and the inequalities it perpetuates, both within and between states, exacerbate ecological vulnerabilities by intersecting with social, economic, and political risks. At this nexus, the interdisciplinary, multifaceted, multi-actor, multi-layered, and inclusive nature of the critical problem-solving approach becomes crucial. By combining the emancipatory goals of critical theories with the practical problem-solving functions of traditional approaches, Green Theory can facilitate the development of concrete alternatives to polycrisis, including the ecological one.

Eckersley's (2018; 2020) conceptualizations of ecocentrism, state critique, and the Green State align with the critical problem-solving approach. This approach, as Eckersley (2020) emphasizes, serves as a practical tool for transitioning to a green state. It functions as a problem-solving methodology aimed at achieving transformation, the core objective of critical theories. The main challenge in the transition process lies in its lack of political preference, which often results in small-scale, superficial fixes rather than genuine systemic transformations. In this context, one of the critical contributions of the critical problem-solving approach is its ability to render transformation an achievable and preferable process. Eckersley (2020: 11–14) suggests the utility of “strategic bracketing,” where certain problematic structures are temporarily set aside to facilitate incremental solutions. This step-by-step approach allows initial problems to be addressed, laying a stronger foundation for tackling subsequent challenges. Addressing issues incrementally and with practical solutions may enable dismantling entrenched structures towards gradual transformation (Eckersley 2020). Eckersley (2020: 12) emphasizes the advantages of such an approach, allowing for adjustments, reversals, and scaling based on evolving circumstances. However, the outcomes of these steps remain uncertain. The risk of bracketing in a world where populism and authoritarianism are on the rise is imminent. Due to the neglect of ecological concerns, short-term responses might bring unexpected challenges, deepening the burden of crises and fostering apathy toward more structural changes.

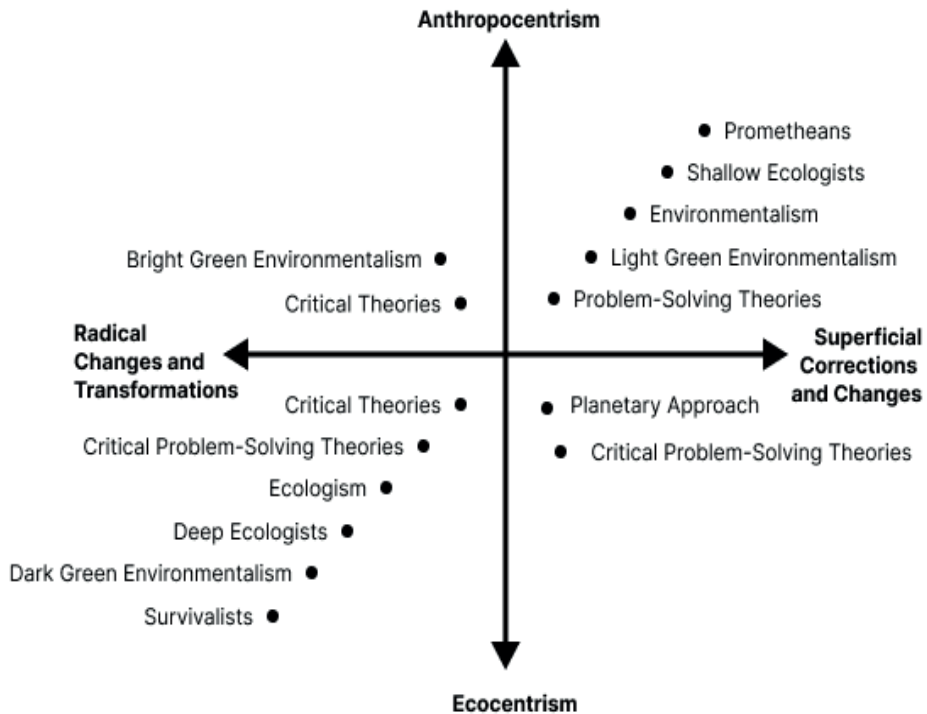
Eckersley (2020) identifies cyclical crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, as potential catalysts for transformation. Measures taken during the pandemic (including restrictions,

economic support for workers, reductions in carbon emissions, and shifts toward sustainable alternatives) demonstrated the potential to raise awareness and drive political change on urgent issues such as the climate crisis (Filho et al. 2022; Yang et al. 2022). However, as the pandemic's effects diminished and extraordinary measures were relaxed, economic growth-oriented and carbon-based policies resumed, and carbon emissions increased (IEA 2022; Bhanumati et al. 2022). Although the crisis held the potential for transition and transformation, it was ultimately addressed with short-term problem-solving measures, and the status quo persisted.

In a politically complex environment characterized by injustice and distorted relationships, selecting forward-looking, effective, and transformative steps is vital. These steps, identified through intersectional analysis, are considered the “next best” options, balancing feasibility with transformative potential. Intersectional analysis examines the convergent and divergent trends shaping political, cultural, ideological, and economic dynamics within a specific social context and period. This analysis enables the identification of opportunities and challenges for transformative political actions (Gilbert 2019; Hall and Massey 2010). The critical problem-solving approach thus contributes to ensuring an equitable and just transition process grounded in social and ecological justice and collective responsibility. Hence, we argue that by enhancing the intersectionality in Green Theory, the critical problem-solving perspective can become more concrete and as long as ecocentric normative framework is strengthened, the comprehensive, practical and effective solutions for structural problems can be designed in the context of IR.

Given the ongoing political discussions in the international system, particularly amid accelerating military conflicts in regions such as Ukraine and the Middle East, ecological issues, such as the climate crisis, have receded from the global agenda. This raises a critical question: Can IR, which traditionally focuses on states and anthropocentric dynamics within the axes of cooperation and conflict, adopt a theoretical approach that holistically addresses the planet and its interconnected systems from an ecocentric perspective? Accordingly, we propose that integrating critical problem-solving methodology, ecocentric ontology, and a planetary approach can help clarify and strengthen Green Theory's political science-based analytical and critical framework by adapting it to IR. Hence, the ecological issues might be systematically placed as a fundamental element of global politics.

Ecocentric ontology draws on diverse approaches, including anthropocentrism, biocentrism, environmentalism-ecologism, shallow ecology-deep ecology, prometheanism-survivalism, and the spectrum of green from light to dark. It incorporates posthumanism, planetary approaches, and historical materialism, as discussed in previous sections. The matrix in Figure 2 categorizes various perspectives within Green Thought, ranging from anthropocentrism to ecocentrism on the vertical axis and from superficial corrections to radical transformations on the horizontal axis. This visualization aims to reflect, in a simpler way, how different green approaches see the potential for social, political, and ecological change.

Figure 2. Categorization Matrix of Green Approaches

Source: Figure designed by authors.

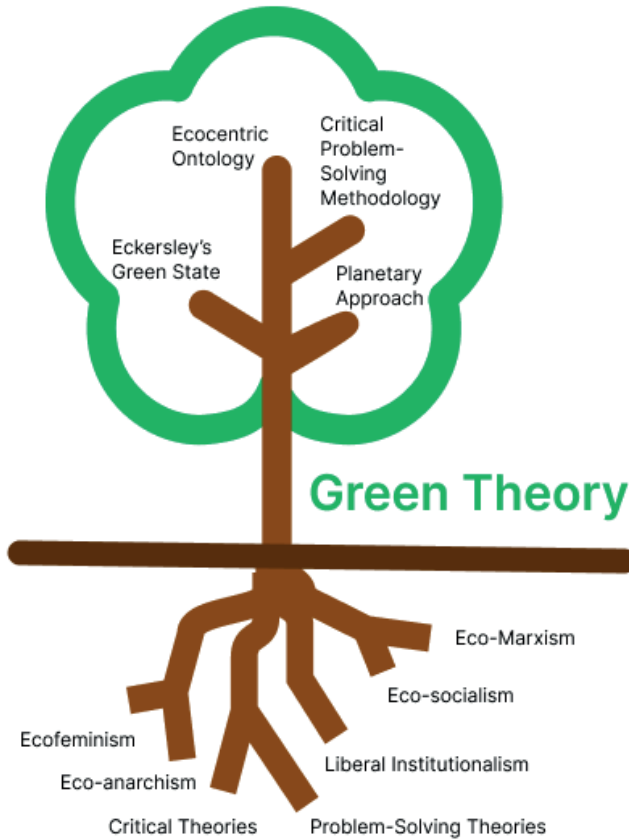
In this regard, the planetary approach, close to a critical problem-solving perspective, is positioned as an alternative that challenges the dominant and damaging influence of anthropocentric perspectives by embracing not only human agency but also Earth and the plural world's agency. Planetary approach is described as a framework that “works for human and non-human beings and is at once singular and plural, combining the particular and multiple differences of culture, gender, privilege, location, species, and temporality with the universality of common interconnected existence on planet Earth” (Fishel et al. 2018). This perspective can promote an ecocentric shift in consciousness, serving as a practical alternative to revolutionary transformations of systems like capitalism or to gradual reforms within the system. It clarifies specific actions for addressing ecological issues and their complex impacts from a fair and equal perspective. Critical problem-solving methodology, meanwhile, provides tools and frameworks to address the interplay between human and ecological dynamics through the ecocentric lens described above. Similar to the intersectionality of planetary politics, its interdisciplinary and unifying capacity offers an alternative.

Additionally, a critical problem-solving methodology can provide a foundation for adapting Eckersley's concept of the Green State to IR with an ecocentric perspective for complex interactions. Achieving this goal will undoubtedly involve overcoming a range of challenges. Since state behavior is shaped by dynamic interactions, shifting power relations, and strategic calculations rather than predetermined or stable behavioral patterns, states are

unlikely to initiate transformative ecological changes on their own or act spontaneously without societal pressure. Therefore, creating a driving, enabling force through political interactions and coalitions of green movements is critical. These efforts must aim to expand representation of all societal segments, increase democratic participation, and foster consultations and negotiations that critically address ecological changes and transformations; nevertheless, the question of how still dominates.

Reinterpreting Green Theory as an IR approach can help systematize a comprehensive analysis of the ecological crisis, its connections to other crises, and the roles of multiple actors in international politics, along with their capacities for change. It neither fully rejects traditional nor critical approaches but incorporates elements of both through an analytical eclecticism. It positions the state as a changing and transformative actor whose role is utilized but not dominant, while upholding values such as the rule of law and fair trials within international law. The IR discipline, particularly when examining ecological issues such as the climate crisis and the actions of several actors, cannot operate effectively through a single theoretical lens. An eclectic approach enables simultaneous analyses across different levels, paving the way for the development of more comprehensive, holistic frameworks.

Figure 3. Branching Green Theory in IR



Source: Figure designed by authors.

Figure 3 illustrates how Green Theory, as a theory of IR, can be framed as an alternative approach that integrates critical problem-solving methodology, ecocentric ontology, planetary politics, and the concept of the Green State. As Figure 3 indicates, using the tree metaphor, Green Theory is nourished by diverse green thoughts, broadening the spectrum of green and revealing its epistemological roots. However, the branches of Green Theory in IR concretize the ontological and methodological structure. Reframing Green Theory through the lens of critical problem-solving methodology can facilitate the step-by-step development of holistic, practical solutions without abandoning critical practice. The planetary approach can also ensure Green Theory's structural integration into the discipline of IR. Within this framework, the international system can be evaluated holistically from an ecocentric perspective, emphasizing the relationality and interdependency between subsystems.

Moreover, it is possible to reestablish the international actor framework that extends beyond anthropocentrism to account for other species and ecological entities. Without disregarding the state's functionality, this perspective includes the potential effects and responsibilities of non-state actors in addressing the causes and consequences of, and solutions to, ecological problems, guided by the principle of ecological balance. In the normative context of ecocentric ontology, achieving ecological balance in the international system could be realized through:

- The democratic and ecological transformation of the state is supported by social movements,
- The holistic, fair, and equitable protection of the rights of humans, other species, and ecological entities from the international to the local level, and
- The implementation of effective political, economic, and legal sanctions against ecological degradation.

While ecological approaches often criticize the discipline of IR, the transformative potential of Green Theory within an ecological framework should not be underestimated. Tackling ecological crises alongside polycrisis is essential for equitable and just change and for sustaining life on Earth. International collaboration and collective action are crucial, and the reframing of Green Theory could meaningfully contribute to this effort.

Conclusion

This study seeks to contribute to the green debates within the discipline of IR in an era of polycrisis. In an international system where the effects of ecological degradation, especially the climate crisis, are accelerating and intersecting with systemic inequalities, the importance of approaching these challenges from an ecological perspective becomes increasingly evident. This study argues that Green Theory, with its methodological and ontological diversity, should be framed as a holistic ecological approach to international relations and politics, grounded in green ontology, critical problem-solving methodology, Eckersley's Green State concept, and planetary approach.

The alternative analytical framework, presented through the tree metaphor, synthesizes various green approaches with a holistic lens to understand the interdependence in the international system, systematically analyze complex multilayered issues in the era of polycrisis, and discuss alternatives. As the study demonstrates, green thought is characterized by remarkable diversity and complexity that derives from fundamental disagreements over the relationship between humanity and nature, the role of capitalism and the state in ecological destruction, and the scope and pace of the transformation. Therefore, to clarify this mostly fragmented and often contradictory discussion, we adopt a critical problem-solving approach that combines the emancipatory aspirations of critical theories with the practical orientation of problem-solving methodologies, providing an alternative framework that neither yields to the status quo nor retreats into abstract utopianism. Moreover, the methodological and theoretical pluralism of this approach enables the integration of strategic bracketing, intersectional analysis, and incremental yet transformative action for an ecocentric reframing of Green Theory. We tend to offer a practical and comprehensive framework for Green Theory in IR (which allows for pluralistic or eclectic methodologies but still lacks consistency) to analyze the causes and consequences of ecological problems holistically and to address the interactions between human and ecological systems. When integrated with a green ontology and a planetary perspective, this approach redefines the scope of green IR analysis, beyond the greening of the state, by reconceptualizing the international system as the biosphere and expanding the framework of rights, justice, and responsibility beyond human communities to encompass all ecological entities, processes, and systems. Hence, the IR lens of Green Theory becomes sharper for holistically analyzing systemic relations, interdependencies among agents, and how this structure can be ecologically and equitably rebuilt.

However, despite the theoretical clarification, practical ambiguities remain. The political resistance of authoritarian and populist movements, structural power relations, the persistent dominance of growth-oriented economic paradigms, and deepening inequalities challenge a synchronized transnational green transformation. Future research could further explore the conditions under which critical problem-solving strategies can be effectively operationalized, the role of social movements in driving green state transformation, and the possibilities for institutionalizing ecocentric norms within international law and governance. By bridging the gap between critical ambition and practical engagement, Green Theory, reframed as proposed, has the potential to contribute meaningfully to the pursuit of equitable, just, and ecologically sustainable alternatives to polycrisis.

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Notes

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