



■ **Public Voices**

Lipietz • Geography, Ecology, Democracy

■ **Articles**

Brechin • Conserving the Race

Nevarez • Water on Whim

Bonnett • Mother Nature's Sons

■ **Reflections**

Wills • The Academic Sweatshop

■ **Review Essay**

Boal • The Sight of Nature

■ **Book Reviews**

## Public Voices

### GEOGRAPHY, ECOLOGY, DEMOCRACY\*

Alain Lipietz†

For a long time, critical geography has closely followed Marxist inspired sociology or critical economics by attempting to trace on the ground the marks of social relations of domination and capitalist exploitation. Most attention has been focused on relations between those from above and those from below, reducing the critical activity of the geographer to opposing the "space projected from above" with resistance from the "space of communities."<sup>1</sup>

This critical endeavor must not be rejected, for in society there are indeed asymmetrical power relations and, insofar as space is the product of society, the traditional agenda of critical geography remains pertinent. The postmodern critique of the Grand Narrative of the struggle between those above and those below is not so much aimed at the legitimacy of this agenda, but rather at its rigid schematism. As the new tendencies of critical social theories have shown, those (men and women) below are not simply a homogeneous group defined in complementary relation to those above, but are themselves diverse and contradictory. And as political ecology has reminded us, people are part of a system which opposes them to each other and to their own environment. This paper will stress the necessity of considering this "horizontal" relation (which, again, does not preclude the relevance of "vertical" relations of domination).

In a first section we shall explore (human) ecology as a social relation. As with any social relation, it is a contradictory one and must be regulated. Thus in the second section we explore some classical forms of resolution for "horizontal" contradictions – the market and democracy – and their relevance to ecology. In the third section, we call for participa-

\* Translation by B. Lipietz. An earlier version was presented at the 1994 Annual Meeting of the Association of American Geographers, San Francisco.

† Research Director at CNRS-CEPREMAP (Centre d'Études Prospectives d'Économie Mathématique Appliquées à la Planification), 142 rue Chevaleret, Paris 75013

tory democracy and we show, in the fourth section, why human geography and its approach to landscape are a good introduction to the ethics of such an ecological democracy.

### Ecology as a Social Relation

If today ecology is a major concern, if ecology is becoming explicitly political, it is obviously because there is a "crisis of the environment." The ferocity, indeed the failure, of negotiations at the Rio Conference well illustrate the true nature of environment: it is what others do. Others who encumber us, who pollute our space; those other nations that don't care. Indeed, as Jean Paul Sartre would put it, "environment is others."<sup>2</sup> But of course we are, each and all of us, the others' environment. Ecology is a social relation, a relation between human beings.

So what about Nature? We thought that ecology was about Nature, that political ecology was the relationship between Humankind and Nature, a kind of unformulated reverse of those "productive forces" dear to Marxists. And, indeed, political ecology is a social relation which has a particular connection with all that is *not* human activity, that which we call "Nature," or "environment," and that the geographer calls "landscape." That exterior can, in addition, be the product of *past* social activity: a neighborhood, an urban heritage, a shantytown, bocage, a planted forest. What matters is the fact that environment is given prior to any particular activity, and Nature (that is, in common representation, wild life) is just the most extreme form of this exteriority.<sup>3</sup>

This *exteriority* of Nature to human activity, and this immersion of Humankind in Nature, are essential. In his critique of nascent socialism, *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, Marx begins with these words: "It is false to say that labor is the source of all wealth. Nature is as much the source of use values (which are, all the same, the true wealth!) as labor is, which itself is only the expression of a natural force, the labor force of humans." In *Capital*, he pointed out that "Work is the father of wealth, but Nature is its mother." In other words, Nature is the condition of all activity and all wealth which is not itself the product of a particular labor. And it is the ignorance of this "mother" which represents the Achilles heel of theoretical – and existing – socialism (as indeed its negation of the feminine: Marx's metaphor is not neutral!).<sup>4</sup> To be an ecologist is first of all to be indignant at the fact that this precondition of our activity, this wealth in itself and for us, is itself disfigured and could be annihilated by irresponsible human activity.

This is the grain of truth in "deep ecology," which indigenous people have reminded us of, as in the famous speech of Chief Seattle (1854) of the Duwamish tribe in response to the President of the United States who offered to buy the land on which they lived:

We know this at least: Earth does not belong to Man, it is Man that belongs to Earth. That, we know. All things are related as the blood that unites a same family. All things are related, and all that befalls Earth befalls the sons of that Earth. It is not man that has woven the weft of life: he is only a thread of it. All that he does to the weft, he does to himself."

But we must observe at once that if Humanity is part of Nature, so too has Nature itself now become humanized. The stability of Himalayan slopes, the porosity of soils, the acidity of waters, the concentration of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, biological diversity in the countryside, the thickness of the ionospheric ozone layer, all that exists in the world under the moon, is today modified by human activity. Man has become responsible for Nature, the greatest telluric power of our planet. There is a tendency for the distinctions between wild nature, socially constructed nature (fields, gardens), built environment, and others' activity, to fade away.

We must finally emphasize the fact that "natural Nature," i.e., environment that is not yet a by-product of social activity (for example, tropical rain forests), is a human stake to be preserved as it is. The Greens often proclaim this in the name of beauty, and they most certainly have a point. If one counts almost all human activities (from war to sexuality without omitting production) as necessary to the reproduction of societies, then what remains to be considered as the net product, as the surplus of these societies, is the sum of the beauties that they bequeath to future generations. In the liability column of the balance sheet, we have the sum of those natural beauties that they have borrowed from future generations and give back disfigured.

Here, even the best Marxian tradition (that of the Young Marx of the 1844 *Manuscripts*) is insufficient for an ecologist. When Marx calls for taking Nature into account because it is "the inorganic body of Man" (which he would thus have to absorb, to appropriate, in effect to digest), he imposes an anthropocentrism – a legitimate move for a scientist.<sup>5</sup> But this anthropocentrism can lead to the worst excesses, as the megalomaniac and demiurgic humanism of "real socialism" has shown, when unchecked and operating freely in the Siberian taiga or the steppes of Kazakhstan. Nature is not only the inorganic body of Man. It is as much the inorganic body of the bee, the bison or the Royal Eagle, and our organic bodies are as much the inorganic body of worms. To recall these banalities is not to depart from humanism. It is rather the basis of the best of humanism, that of Blaise Pascal: "Man is a thinking reed, the weakest being in Nature, but with his thought, man understands Nature." That is, humankind is *accountable* for Nature, and is the *only* bearer of this responsibility.

But our governments, even if they can pretend to ignore the "existence

value" of Nature's beauty (the beauty of elephants, of everlasting snows, or of tropical rainforests), are forced to safeguard this natural nature, for it remains a condition for future activities. Wild species, and the biological diversity that they represent, constitute the immune system of our biosphere, the ultimate recourse against biological catastrophes. The atmosphere, in its pre-industrial composition (i.e., excluding the gases of industrial or agricultural origin, gases which are now gradually saturating it and increasing the greenhouse effect) was the condition of the emergence of our civilizations, and is probably the condition of their survival.

Political ecology is thus a *relation of each to all others*, in their common relation to environment, which is both the product and the precondition of any activity.

A social relation of each to all others, and even to "all the rest?" For the average Marxist, this is at first sight an unusual social relation. Marxists have focused on relations opposing and linking human groups to each other, i.e., social classes (masters and slaves, bourgeoisie and proletariat). To be sure, these relations are very important: they structure human activity, they determine the unequal distribution of wealth and power. The denunciation and analysis of these relations are a precious heritage of human consciousness. But Marxists are disoriented by this social relation which lacks historical subjects other than "each" and "all" – all meaning here all the other users/consumers, all the other polluters, all the other people, all the following generations, etc. . . .

And yet. . . . Humanity has learned to regulate these horizontal tensions "between each and all;" social scientists (Karl Marx included) have learned to identify them. It is, for example, the relation between the private producer and social production regulated by the market, or between the citizen and the community, regulated by politics. Taking our definition of political ecology, it is perhaps not surprising that the market and forms of the political (democracy for instance) are thus already practical ecology. Thus, not only is ecology political, but the political, and in particular, democracy is already ecological!

### On Regulation of Ecological Contradictions<sup>6</sup>

How can we regulate a "contradiction" (to use Marxist phraseology), a relation of tensions between each and all? Like all social contradictions: via mores (habits, values – the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu would say "habitus") and institutions.

To regulate a relation "via mores," indeed ideologically, may seem farcical these days. Long gone, it seems, are the days when Montesquieu proclaimed Virtue as democracy's leading principle, or when Marxists

emphasized the fact that a "new man" was a prerequisite to building socialism. Substantive democracy, that is, democracy defined by the content – more or less social or popular – of what it does, is today derided; today democracy is merely procedural: how one decides.

And yet, "Thou shall not kill" was, and remains, the first great principle of human ecology and therefore, of democracy. The great conquest of the workers' movement was to render "social justice" (or at least a minimum of justice!) a norm to be respected by the State. The mission of ecology is to enlarge "Thou shall not kill" beyond social justice to international justice ("Thou shall not pollute the other's domain"), inter-generational justice ("Thou art only borrowing this planet from the next generation"), even to justice between living species! In this sense, and in the same way that social democracy<sup>7</sup> went beyond civil democracy, political ecology appears like an *aufhebung* of social democracy: the recognition, at first moral, of new rights, of new bearers-of-rights, and of new objects of rights, thus of new obligations and of new interdictions. Perhaps the greatest advance of the Rio Conference and of its hundreds of parallel conferences, will be to have solemnly – and in the mass media – recognized new rights and obligations to be incorporated within social norms in accordance with honesty, respect of the other, or the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Rio has built the basis of jurisprudential justice, even without positive and democratically established international legislation.

However, ecological mores will only flourish within adapted institutions. What is needed is not so much that the majority of citizens should be "virtuous," but, more to the point, that virtue be encouraged. As we have seen, institutional forms of regulation of contradictions between "each" and "all" already exist; they are of the political type or the market type.

Ecological regulations of the political type are, in our culture, almost of necessity statist: norms, interdictions, taxes and subventions, and in particular, strategic choices in urban and regional planning and equipment. By this, I mean: space allocation, choice of major infrastructure such as highways, technical orientations in decisive domains for the environment. No need here to emphasize how much, at all levels, the political is mobilized. A good illustration of this problem is provided by the highway program in France and the difficulties the (Green) Presidency of the Nord-Pas-de-Calais Region faced in challenging that program. The choice of a dominant mode of transportation is a State prerogative, a political affair. Representative democracy of course plays a crucial part, but it is only a part. What is essential is citizen compliance with the decision of the territorial authority. Information and public debate constitute the first step. The second step is that of decision. The most important stage however is that which follows decision: social acceptance of the political

choice. It is useless to replace highways with railways if those who possess a car prefer to use it whatever the costs.

Let us take another example: energy. Should we give priority to nuclear power (against the greenhouse effect?), to other sources of energy however polluting (against nuclear threat?) . . . or should we economize on our use of energy (against both risks at the same time)? Whatever the preferred option, this is a choice which determines our very way of life. A choice between fears, a choice in risk-assessment, a choice of responsibility. Thus, the political decision is only a moment in an infinitely more complex process of reflection and questioning by a society of its own civilization. Political regulation is only *one* moment of moral regulation. And perhaps in just such a situation elected political representatives can have least hope of pushing legislation through forcibly. People must be convinced, and only then will they gradually back the political majority.

What about the market, then? The market's great advantage is that it lets prices be fixed in a decentralized manner and in particular, the "price" that a civilization chooses to give to the utility of certain products or to a measure for the protection of the environment. The problem is that, within the free market, this price only reflects the value of the given product, i.e., the amount of work which such a product has necessitated (the "father" of this wealth). The price cannot reflect other aspects such as, for instance, the degradation of the "great exterior" ("mother Nature") – that is, unless laws demand it: by imposing taxes, issuing negotiable permits, in short by internalizing external costs. Politics, and democracy in particular, are thus already the basis of an "ecological market economy."

To regulate access to nature via market mechanisms is first of all to effect an initial endowment of rights of access to this nature, then to fashion the instruments for controlling its use, and finally to institutionalize the places and mechanisms of exchange of rights. All of this is highly political. And yet, in a world where pollution is everywhere felt and produced, market mechanism is probably the only way to decentralized regulation. But there are two problems. First of all, a market economy does not exist everywhere (one cannot operate against itinerant slash and burn agriculture through taxes) and most important of all, the initial allocation of "rights" for the use of Nature remains an entirely political problem.

For what is the fundamental issue at stake here? It is quite simply, that we must all realize that free access to these "common goods of humanity," like atmosphere or biological diversity (the subject of two great conventions negotiated at Rio), this free access to Nature, is a thing of the past. Humankind is faced with itself each time it produces carbon dioxide or appropriates a gene. The vivid international debate on these two essential points will one day, perhaps, lead to market regulations, but it is impor-

tant to note that these regulations will have been instituted by a political agreement. This international treaty more or less will respect the equality of human beings. Thus it will be a more or less democratic treaty.

### For an Ecological Participatory Democracy

The State (or some international regime) thus constitutes a necessary – yet stubborn, almost dangerous – stage of ecological regulation. It is stubborn because it only represents the general interest in the form of an "exteriority" – a power beyond us, when what is at stake is the necessity to interiorize, in everyone's behavior, a duty towards all. It is dangerous because (and old Marxism indeed knew it!), being "exterior," i.e., separated from the community, the State can be appropriated by a minority. As for the market, it's even worse; it is controlled by the wealthiest, with little hope for change unless the State intervenes and takes new action directed toward redistribution.

Can we thus only escape ecological risk by increasing, again, the power of these two Leviathans? Not necessarily. For the Political is not only the State. It is the organized confrontation of interests, and in fact, is in the first place the social construction of the representation of identities and interests. Market, diplomacy, and even representative democracy come only afterward, once interests are already fixed. Interests, mores, implicit compromises, all these are built at first or in parallel, in the midst of debate, out of confrontation. A confrontation which must itself be organized: in particular by those NGOs which proved so significant around the Rio Conference.

First, let us illustrate with a painful example. The immense megapolis of Sao Paulo where two thirds of housing is "informal" (i.e., outside norms and state regulations), depends for its water on artificial lakes protected by a green belt. Already a million *favellados* (shantytown dwellers) have invaded this zone. Often orchestrated by "radical" militants of the Workers' Party, under the banner of "right to housing" and against "bourgeois legality," these illegal implantations of favellas are getting dangerously close to the lakes. Faced with such a threat, adding to the existing threat of cholera, the Sao Paulo municipality – governed by the same Workers' Party – was ready to use public force. This, then, is an example of an ecological social relation, i.e., one that does not oppose class against class, but "all to each." In the name of the right to housing, poor people are about to deprive others, also disinherited, of their right to drinking water! To argue that socialist reform of the terribly inegalitarian Brazilian society would make it possible to solve the housing problem is clearly not enough; in any case this would take time. Such a contradiction can only be solved in a peaceful manner via face-to-face

democracy, via a mutual understanding of the interests of each. But of course this entails that interests be voiced (and that is not always the case) and therefore organized.

There will be an effective struggle for the safeguarding of the rights of Nature and of future generations (while respecting the right of present generations to build the material conditions of their well-being), there will be conciliation between "Environment and Development" (to caricature a debate much more complex in reality), only if these rights are organized in order to allow the most direct possible confrontation between them. The best solution would be for this confrontation to act as direct political regulation. It is, in any case, an ideal towards which one must reach. And it was the almost unanimous conclusion of the NGO forums organized around the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development. Thus, tropical forests would be better defended through the confrontation of short- and long-term interests of those who make their livelihood from those forests than through the intervention of a High Authority, Security Council, or UN "green-keepers."

This rise of NGOs around the world, be they focused on environment or on development, in search of solutions via participatory democracy, is perhaps one of the greatest advances in the debate provoked by the Rio Conference. Here we find again that ecology, having only "recently" become political, is in fact politics. And further that the highest form of politics – democracy – is ecological in its origin.

### Landscape, Ethics and Alterity

Participatory democracy can only exist if the other is recognized as "other" (as another bearer-of-rights, for instance) through face-to-face experiment. Besides, the existence of "all the others" with whom one is faced constitutes the environment of each one inasmuch as it is in one's range of activity. The environment as range or scope of the activity of a society on its own land is the landscape, and is a specific object of the geographer.

The landscape is the scope of a land or country (this product of past social activity transforming Nature, however minimal this transformation), but more precisely, that country considered as separated, "exterior" to any particular activity. The landscape is thus a "school of Otherness," and school of the ethic of Otherness, the enlarged "thou shalt not kill" that I was evoking earlier on. Critical geography can therein be regarded as the preparatory school for participatory democracy.

Landscape appears as exterior to activity first of all by its natural character. These contour lines, these rocks, this life that erupts in the spring (with or without fertilizers or manure), this life which is eclipsed in the autumn (with or without pesticides or burning), these bird songs,

these passages of wild animals: nothing in that depends in any way on human effort. Nature "which no human effort can command except by obeying it" (as Spinoza said), recalls to us with an overwhelming, exasperating, pacifying evidence, the words of Marx quoted above: "Labor is only the father, and nature is the mother of all wealth."

Second, landscape appears as exterior to any particular activity, crystallized, because it is the fruit of generations of humans, of generations that have piled upon nature like archaeological layers becoming geological layers, taking root, becoming an integral part of that nature by their very succession. Culture, second nature, so much indeed as to become nature, second culture, bygone culture, as much foreign to our projects as a mountain: industrial wasteland, ancient cults . . .

Landscape appears exterior to any particular activity, crystallized a third time because the social activity that models the environment forever dominates partial, punctual activities, that concur in to this collective never-ended process. Contrary to the bees' nest, to the beaver's dam, to the architect's facade, the landscape is never the product of a particular activity, but the cumulative effect of *a priori*, non-coordinated actions.

Landscape is thus first of all Otherness, in the face of human activity and outlook. It must, it only needs to, offer itself to the human scope (otherwise it is only morphology, like the Moon before Armstrong set foot on it). There is no more extraordinary and emblematic landscape in the United States in my opinion than those rock tables surging from the desert called Monument Valley. And it is a *human* landscape through the films of John Ford, through the memory of the pioneers who crossed it and who, in the tourists' minds, still haunt these desert lands.

Because it is alterity under our gaze, our scope, landscape is a face, and thereby acquires the ethical power of the face, superbly analyzed by Levinas (1982). "The face is exposed, menaced, almost inviting us to a violent act. At the same time, the face is what forbids us to kill." With the Other's face in one's scope – and the same is true of the landscape – human beings, with their capacity to mark the world, meet the ethical, individual, social or ecological problem, the problem of good and evil: to caress or destroy. "The face is what one cannot kill, or at least the face is what means to say: thou shalt not kill. Murder, to be sure, is a banal phenomenon: one can kill the other, the ethical exigency is not an ontological necessity."

But let us not be mistaken. There are many ways to wound/spoil, humiliate, disfigure, a face, a landscape. Not only the whip that slashes the one, the highway which tears the other. With the glance comes the possibility of pornography (as prostituted representation), of reducing the landscape to a given, static object, fixed into pleasing the eyes. Eyes which one turns, ashamed, as they see an encampment of poor Navajos in Monument Valley.

Between massacre and pornography, what will the political ecology of

the landscape be? It will surely reject the sterile 18th century view of a Luc Ferry, which places domestication "à la française" in opposition to the romantic ordering of wilderness. The role of critical geography is thus to make us love the landscape as the land, the country where we live, in the reciprocal fertilization of the past and the present, of nature and culture. In time, the landscape, as with the face of a loved one, cannot, will not remain the same. Our duty is then to learn to live with the changing face of the landscape, to live by negotiating its transformations, to respect its diversity when an irreversible transformation of one of its parts becomes necessary. By looking at it with the eyes of the one who sees for the last time.

### Notes

1. I did not escape these caricatures (see for examples Lipietz 1977; 1985).
2. See Sartre, *Huis-Clos*. Sartre (1960) is also the theoretician of "pratico-inerte," which is closely connected with our concept of environment.
3. In French newspapers, "nature" appears to refer to the "good" side of human ecology, and "environment" to the spoiled one.
4. Compte (1991) pointed out that "Man's first environment is his mother's womb."
5. Before the invention of the word ecology by Haeckel, scientists used to speak of "external physiology" of species.
6. More on this in Lipietz, 1995.
7. This term here must not be read politically; rather it designates the model of civilization which flourished in Northern Europe after 1950, where wage workers acquired not only the right to vote, but also a right to social security, to social legislation and to a share of the fruits of growth.

### References

- Compte, F. (1991) *Jocaste Délivrée*. Paris: La Découverte.
- Levinas, E. (1982) *Éthique et infini*. Paris: Fayard.
- Lipietz, A. (1977) *Le Capital et son espace*. Paris: F. Maspéro.
- Lipietz, A. (1985) *Le local et le national dans la crise globale du capital*.
- Lipietz, A. (1995) *Green Hopes. The Future of Political Ecology*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Sartre, J. P. (1960) *Critique de la raison dialectique*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Seattle (1854) *Nous sommes peut-être frères*. Bats (F): Utopie.