

Reflections on political ecology, an Alain Lipietz Interview

by *Betsy Donald and Brad Reed*

As a political movement and academic field of study, political ecology is gaining increasing attention. The term is broadly defined as the attempt to understand the political economic sources, conditions and ramifications of environmental change.

One of the key figures in the European political ecology movement is Alain Lipietz, activist in the French green party and renowned intellectual. This interview with Lipietz, of the famed CEPREMAP in Paris, was conducted last month when he was the Visiting Professor at York University's Political Economy and Ecology Summer School.

foundation: How do you balance your activist life with your academic life? You have a very rich academic life. You have published 3 books in English and 13 books in French (and just recently finished your 14th). You also have a very rich activist life. How have you found the balance between the two? Or do you find a way of merging the two?

Lipietz: First, I sacrifice a lot. One of my objectives, of course, is to push for the reduction of labour time! The trick is obviously that I have an extremely good opportunity to treat my academic life as an activist life. What I do in my research is directly oriented by my activist activity. For instance, I just finished a book and I sent a diskette to my publisher one hour and a half before I took the plane to come here to Toronto. My publisher said, "but it is more than 850,000 K! How could you do this in 6 weeks? It is impossible!" But it is possible for me because this book, entitled *The Hour Glass Society*, is half academic and half activist. It is a summary of a lot of things that I have done for academic reasons, but it is also the sum of a lot of things that I have done for activist reasons. I think to be able to do both is a very very great opportunity.

foundation: So you basically don't separate the two. It is like a ying and a yang.

Lipietz: No I do not separate the two. I work as an academic on how to have a better solidaristic world, between nations, between generations, between the unemployed and employed, etc. So all my work in my academic life is about my ecological activism.

foundation: The Green Party is relatively unknown in North America, probably less so in Canada than in the United States. Could you give us a bit of a history and overview and maybe some of the objectives



of the party?

Lipietz: I think the most important thing to emphasize is that the green parties in Europe are "rainbow coalitions" centred on ecological issues. They are built out of activism in feminism, in working-class self management oriented activism, in regionalism, and in the peace-movement etc. Green parties are a gathering of all the anti-systemic social movements of the post-1960s period. They progressed everywhere where social democracy was both powerful and in crisis — that is in Germany, Belgium and The Netherlands, and Scandinavia. They have some difficulties in Southern Europe (Latin Europe) — that is where the communist party could transform itself into the new

foundation: So the communist parties would co-op these movements?

Lipietz: Yes, so the communist parties gave no room for the green parties. So why is the Green Party developing in social democracies where the Communist Party is both powerful and in crisis? Because the green parties are in fact rainbow coalitions but they are centred around green issues, issues which the social democracy of the past did not take into account. Social democracy

could be a very good compromise between capital and labour on issues such as purchasing power, employment and the welfare state, but it ignored the fact that the production and consumption pattern (which was the basis for the compromise) was harmful to the long-term health of people, of species and of all generations to come. Green appears as the best you can do. In Germany, for instance, the Green Party is extremely powerful. They are called green, but to a North American, they could come across also as a feminist party, a peace-movement party or a self-management worker party etc.

foundation: ...especially in North America where we have a tendency to fragmentize and compartmentalize movements and as a result these movements end-up getting more insular and no one works together.

Lipietz: In Europe you can consider the Greens as a rainbow coalition, but they are centred or gathered around some basic common values: autonomy, solidarity and accountability. First, you have to be autonomous because you have to be in charge of your own life, in charge of your own actions, that is, to feel what you are doing with your own actions. Second, you are in solidarity. This solidarity is not just equality of opportunity, but rather each person should be given opportunities at all times. You should be free, but you should be in charge of your brothers, with the rest of humankind; nobody should be left out. Third, accountability: you have to take into account what the consequences are of your model of production and consumption to the rest of the planet, both geographically and in the future.

foundation: There seems to be a very recent movement in America around Michael Lerner's book, *The Politics of Meaning*, that seems to be almost like a template for what you are saying, especially around the issues of personal accountability as being a foundation in politics.

Lipietz: Yes. The difference between ecology and economy, is the word "ology," which is about the meaning of what we are doing, the way we are producing and consuming.

foundation: There has been a movement in North America that sees both the left and the right as being bankrupt. Thus, something new has to emerge as we go into the next millennium. Does the Green party see itself as that kind of harbinger of the left and right?

Lipietz: We have a tendency to consider (continued on page 4)



(Continued from page 3)

ourselves the same way as the liberal democrats saw themselves as an important force in the 18th century, the way the republicans and national independence people were concerned about the important things in the 19th century, and as the socialists saw themselves as an important force in developing and raising social issues throughout the 19th and the first half of the 20th century. We think that ecology is the main issue of the last part of the 20th century and 21st century. Which means, as you say, that ecology is going to put its own issue on the agenda of the others — right and left. But it also means that it is somehow the left of the next century — that is if you say by definition that the right is people who want to reproduce the world as it is, and the left is people who want to change for the best social relations. In the 18th century, the left was liberal republicanism, in the 19th and early 20th century it was social issues, socialists. And I think now it is the ecologists for the next century.

foundation: The graduate course you gave here at York was called "The Planet After Fordism." For those readers who are not political scientists, what on earth does "Fordism" mean?

Lipietz: Fordism was the model of capitalist development which developed in the Northwest of the world between 1945 and say the beginning of the 1980s. The Fordist structure was based on the balancing of mass production and mass consumption. There was a welfare state, with collective bargaining and with some limits to free trade. This is completely destroyed now. As you know in Ontario, we are witnessing the progressive destruction of the welfare state, the destabilization of any social compromise by the free trade agreement, etc. This destabilization has a lot of consequences on capital/labour relations and professional

relations, on poverty and equality in the society, and on ecological issues. This course at York is about how a major change in the capital/labour relation could have a lot of social consequences in many social relations on race issues, gender issues, international issues, equity issues, citizenship-feeding issues, etc.

foundation: When you talk about the compromise between capital/labour in the Fordist period, a lot of ecologists would say that compromise was precisely what brought about the rise of the modern ecology movement.

Lipietz: Yes, precisely. The Fordist period was a time when the worker movement, as a reformist movement — I am not speaking on what happened in the Soviet Union which I don't consider as really socialists, but which was done by people who were seeking something like socialism. But I am talking about the other tradition of a worker movement, the social democratic tradition. Its best outcome was social democracy and Fordism. When the Fordist structure was mass consumption and mass consumption, securing full employment, and the progression of a standard of living, when Fordism was rich, it was considered by the worker's movement as something which the workers had nearly finished. At that point, they realize that they had just to continually improve what they had achieved. It was at that time when we saw a divorce between the social democratic workers movement and ecology. Ecology developed as an autonomous movement when the labour movement became more or less happy not with the level, but with the model of capitalist development — that is mass production for mass consumption. Before that time, these two groups were more or less working together in order to forbid child labour, to limit labour time, to secure the sanitization of working-class

neighbourhoods, etc. When all these issues were more or less achieved under Fordism, the worker reformists were then just negotiating for more money. That was the time when ecologists appeared to be saying that this compromise between capital/labour is no good, it is no good for future generations, it is no good for the rest of the planet.

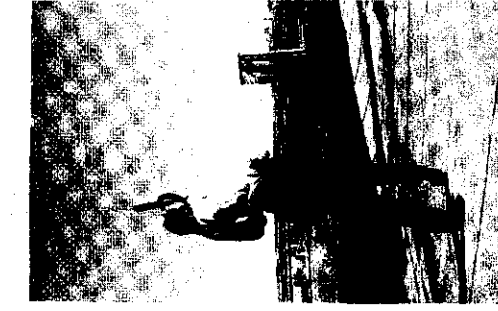
foundation: Yes, and we are still in a struggle for this. In Canada, our ecological concern over the survival of the fisheries has resulted in a loss of jobs for fisherman, and our concern over the timber has resulted in a lot of people not being able to work in that industry.

Lipietz: Also, the concern about pollution of air will make a lot of workers in the car industry lose their jobs.

foundation: So your hope is that somehow they can come together.

Lipietz: Yes. The centre of the green platform is the reduction of labour time. The idea of capitalism in general is that there is more and more productivity. The question is: what should we do with this productivity? The old pre-Fordist ideas of capitalism was to make war. The idea of Fordism was to give money to the workers and increase their consumption. Here many ecologists say that increasing consumption is destroying the planet and forbidding the development of the South. So, let us think of a third way to deal with productivity gains, decrease labour time. If you decrease the labour time, there will be jobs for car makers, fishers, timberers, but killing less fish, less trees, and less people with cars. This is obviously very simple; I elaborate on this much more in my books.

foundation: What seems observable these days is what seems to be a lack of personal accountability, as you say, but also a lack of personal consideration, the common good for each other. We see that reflected in the



Robert Longo: 3 working photographs for Men in Cities 1981-87

rise of violence, etc., some say that this lack of personal consideration for each other and the common good is merely a reflection of our ecological arrogance.

Lipietz: Absolutely. I don't know what is the first. It is the chicken and the egg problem. One of the problems for the green movement is that all of its members, of course, do not necessarily share all of the objectives of the rainbow coalition. For instance, I recently met a woman who was concerned about the protection of non-human species. She voted for me. She said to me that she thought it was good what I was saying at the Council, but she said, "you are a bit too nice to the Arabs." Oh dear, I thought. So I had to use the fact that she considers it good to protect non-human species as a reason to also be kind and welcoming to the migrants and accept them in her neighbourhood, and have neighbours that are Arabs. I think there is a kind of loop between our sympathy for the other species and our sympathy to the other persons in humankind.

foundation: Which is simply "the other?"

Lipietz: Yes, the common point is "the other." Some people like some others but not other ones.

foundation: If we can be very general here, there seems to be a European mindset that seems to be concerned about the collective and an American ideology that is more concerned about the idea of the individual. What has happened in North America, including Canada, is political fragmentation because each is only concerned about its own issues. How do you think the alternative political movements in Canada can overcome that inwardness and insularity, in which each social movement has become insular and no-body works in coalition with one another?

Lipietz: The situation is still worse in North America than in Europe because of the weight of liberalism, the problem is not only the different but "the other," simply because it is the other. Certainly, both for the social movements and for the ecologist movement, the question is of rebuilding the community. The idea that community is good in itself. That community is good for the autonomy of the individual. We need the community to be a real individual. I think this is the starting point of everything. You can start from the respect of the other. The respect to nature could be a starting point. Respect to the deers, respect to the forest, to the trees, could be a starting point. In other words, you do not have the right to hunt anywhere, you do not have the right to fish anywhere. You do not have the right to timber anywhere. You could do it, but in a respectful way. It would be a way to develop community-sense, or on the contrary. Some people will start from the community between human

(Continued on page 7)

(continued from page 4)

beings and say well, this particular human community can only survive if we respect our natural environment. We have to respect the environment in order to respect the community. I think the two processes are equally important. **foundation:** So, in a way, it is sort of acknowledging our communalities and celebrating our differences?

Lipietz: Yes exactly so. Exactly as you say. We have to accept our differences precisely in order to

build a real and rich community. The sense of community somehow exists in a stronger way in America than in Europe, which is one of the very good things about America. But it is my feeling that there is a strong tendency to build a closed community — that is, we will accept a community of the same ethics, with the same morality about gender relations etc., but we do not accept biodiversity within community.

foundation: That's true. I see it as

Leonard Cohen, who believes we are all drowning, we are all holding on to our own little life boats and our own little logs. We don't understand that if we put all the logs together, we could create a raft which we could all get on. Rather we have become these insulated and isolated logs because you disagree with my views, say on sexuality, therefore everything about you is wrong, and so on.

Lipietz: I think it is one of the

possible illness of political ecology. The raft problem. You know that a lot of people say that we are all in the same boat. We are a poor little planet. This image is good because it strengthens the idea of community. It is bad in the sense that it induces first the idea that we could probably survive if there were less people in the world. We could survive if there were more strict order in the world. It is what I call the Adock captain syndrome. Do you know Tintin Adventures, where Captain Adock and his crew go to the moon on the rocket and the Captain is forbidden to smoke because it would burn oxygen? But he discovered that there were a lot of people on the rocket who were free riders, so the solution for Captain Hadock is to give the free riders up on a deserted star and let continue on so he could smoke. The attitude of the North of the planet towards the South is something like that — environmentally. On global environmental issues, the North believes there is no problem if it sticks to its existing model of development. If there was no growth in the South, there would be no global environmental problem. It is the Adock paradox.

foundation: Joseph Campbell says that the predominant modern myth, not myth as a lie, but myth as something that sustains us spiritually, develops out of the photos from the moon when we saw "the planet" and we didn't see different colours, we didn't see lines, we just saw this blue marble in the sky. Do you agree with that image?

Lipietz: Yes. Probably the view from outside ourselves is a very strong fostering for ecology. In my book *Green Hopes*, there is precisely this view of the planet from outside. In the French edition they made a mistake. They put the photo the other way, so it was a view from inside. At the beginning I was furious, but then I thought, well, why not see ourselves from the inside?

foundation: Well that too. The world is contained within ourselves as well.

Lipietz: Yes, of course, why not?

So I accepted finally to see the planet from the inside, which is a very rare view of the planet! All the philosophical idea of ecology is summarized in this view of the planet from the outside. The spiritualists view — the Bhagavad Gita view — where you see all of history from the point of view of Rama. As he says, the time is coming home when all the history is seen at the same time so that the accountability is direct. All the links appear and accountability appears. Or if you look at the Emmanuel Levinas view — the respect of something in front of you because of its beauty, or its otherness — the direct point that it is other is sufficient to justify that you must respect it. The strangeness beauty of a face of a human being, but also of a beast. Also, there is the Habermas view, the 18th century view of communication between all of us that we may build a common sense between us.

I think these three views are captured by this image of the planet from the outside, and are more or less the three philosophical perspectives of ecology. **foundation:** To put it in a simple level, almost a spiritual level — we have to get down from this level of grandiosity that we seem to have come to, that Fordism seemed to have produced, that we are superior beings, that we are a dominion of the planet so that we can make and make and make. Do we have to come down and be humble to be human?

Lipietz: Yes and no. Pascal, the French philosopher, said we are like a roseau, you know it is a grass that is very long and flexible in the water, it is both in and out of the water? Read. We are a *thinking* reed. As a reed, we are the weakest and most humble creature of nature. We are just occupying a tiny place of creation. But we are a *thinking* reed — that is we are the only part of the creation who is thinking, whose project, whose desire was or could be culpable. We are acknowledgeable. We are as deconstructor, but very ambitious as accountable.

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