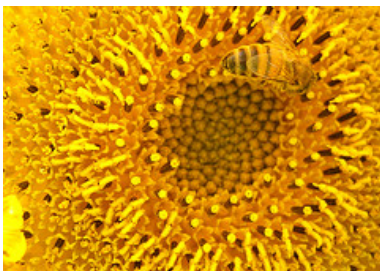


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Regulationist political ecology or environmental economics?

- Économiste, auteur - Écologie -



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The relation between a *régulation* approach and an environmental approach involves a strange paradox. Several economists known for their contribution to Regulationist thought are equally well known for their involvement in ecological movements, parties, clubs and foundations. Conversely, when ecologists want to found their actions in economic analysis, they usually rely on the Regulationist analysis of the "productivist" Fordist model. Yet until the late 1980s Regulationists had hardly contributed at all to an "economy of the environment". The critique of Fordism included only a few denunciations of its attacks on nature, as if the "ecologist citizen" was then speaking out again among economists inspired by this type of analysis [Clerc, Lipietz, Satre-Buisson, 1983; Lipietz, 1985; Beaud, 1989]. Yet in the 1990s Regulationist and Conventionalist approaches have been active in at least two areas: the economy of the environment per se and debates on the United Nations Conference on the Environment and Development and the geopolitics of global ecology.

The Paradox of Green Ecologists

The main reason for the relative disinterest of ecologist Regulationists in an economy of the environment is that generally they are political ecologists, not environmentalists. They view human ecology as the relation between humans, the environment and human activities, on the basis of an "already given" environment which is transformed [Lipietz, 1989; 1993]. Initially therefore they are interested in the way in which social relations of production and consumption model the environment. From the outset they believe that "the constructed context is the main form of the living framework of capitalism" [Lipietz, 1974] and that urban ecology and the *régulation* of urban forms (or, later, the town-country relation) therefore exhaust most of the topic "the environment and Fordism*". In short, the initial disinterest of Regulationists (even ecologists) in the economy of the environment is similar to their initial disinterest in the economy of technical change. Technology, like the environment, is an artificial production in which social relations materialise. Furthermore, this marginalization of Nature and the Machine conforms to an originally Althusserian distrust of the "naturalisation of productive forces". Just as Regulationists do not recognise technological determinism, they refuse to acknowledge an institutionalised compromise* with Nature. Institutionalised compromises only exist between humans and the technological and societal paradigms that unify or oppose them to one another, affecting the evolution of techniques, nature, living things, landscapes and the rights of future generations.

A second reason is due to the fact that the primary object of study for the *régulation* approach is essentially the industrial model of Fordism. It is difficult to claim that Fordism entered a crisis because of the relation between society and the environment. Ecologist Regulationists have occasionally criticised the effects of Fordism on the environment, but when looking for a way out of the crisis of Fordism they focused on its origins (the crisis of the wage-labour nexus, lack of international *régulation*), particularly in the light of the failure of the left in France. They

are more concerned with social living conditions that need to be established (employment, housing, etc.) than with defending the environment as such, especially since they are all influenced by the earlier success of an industrialist model, even if its faults have been criticised. It was only when they examined the Third World [Lipietz, 1985; Beaud, 1989], and especially in the late 1980s when the magnitude of global ecological crises became clear, that Regulationists and those inspired by them (particularly Michel Beaud in his "Vezelay Appeal") began to consider the society/environment relation as a real constraint in the choice of "post-crisis" models. In his conclusion to the international survey for the World Institute for Economic Development Research on capital/labour relations at the dawn of the twenty-first century, Lipietz [1991] emphasises that models "implying negotiation" by wage earners are more favourable from an ecological perspective than models that bank on labour force flexibility. You [1994] also emphasised the disastrous consequences of Korean style "authoritarian developmentalism".

From an ecological point of view, the new development models are preferable because they promote the autonomy of individuals in implementing production forces, and social interaction within companies through income and job redistribution. Once the negotiation of the capital/labour compromise relates to a reduction of work time, rather than the growth of material consumption, it becomes extremely favourable to the environment. The ecological orientations of some Regulationists are probably most clearly expressed here, in the choice of a development model where "abstaining from polluting" is chosen over those that seek to direct growth to minimise pollution or to repair its effects. Thus, in sector studies of energy, it is a matter of economising on consumption before encouraging less dangerous forms of production [Lipietz, Radane, 1993].

Regulation of Space

However, two branches of the Regulationist school could not avoid dealing directly with the issue of the environment, including the "natural" environment; these are spatial and agricultural studies.

Early research on urban ground rent [Lipietz, 1974] showed the way in which, in instances where human economic activity essentially creates its environment, variations in land prices (different ground rent by locality, intensive rents due to investment) are directly related to "environmental value". This guarantees a régulation of the allocation of space, even in the absence of a regulating urban agent who may be indispensable under some conditions. The role of land prices as a form of régulation is an important difference to the economy of water, where it appears that a regulating agent is indispensable for "internalising external effects".

For agricultural specialists, the object and product of labour meet at the crossroads of human activity and the biosphere. In his thesis on agriculture in the United States, Guy Debailleul [1990] encountered "Nature" in the two major crises that frame Fordism. The first was in the 1930s, with the formation of "dust bowls" (erosion crises). Roosevelt's powerful forms of régulation, regulating agricultural revenue and leaving fragile land fallow, lasted until the 1980s when the enormous American surplus collapsed. Debailleul demonstrates that there were two origins of this crisis: the mode of régulation (the inability of national regulating institutions to take control of farming which was increasingly oriented towards exportation), and a strictly "ecological" origin (the dramatic rise in legal obstacles implemented by public authorities for use of chemical inputs near water courses that were increasingly polluted by intensive farming). Catherine Laurent's thesis [1992], which examined the unexpected lack of freeing up of farming in France, follows the Regulationist program in the "farming-society-environment" relation exactly. It moves from the crisis and reforms of the common agricultural policy to the appearance of ferns and eagles in freed pastures, through the end of the hegemony of professional agriculture on the use of rural space and the occupation of non-profitable land by forms of non-standard production.

Anne Lacroix and Amédée Mollard's assessment [1993] of the absence of the environment in the Regulationist corpus should therefore be at least slightly nuanced. This diagnosis does however depend on an extension of the concept of the environment, particularly in its relation to ecology. These authors are correct when they identify three major advantages of the Regulationist approach.

- ▶ The environment presumes an economy oriented by ethics and public decisions.
- ▶ The environment presumes an economic dynamic founded on social reproduction and included within ecological reproduction.
- ▶ The environment presumes a long or very long term economy.

New Research Developments

It is among Conventionalists, who have a similar approach to Regulationists and who adopt several of its concepts, that a new approach to the economy of the environment is developing today. The economy of the environment must deal with the specific problem of the relations of different elements within the context of an environment that is already given. The régulation of relations "between equals" (as opposed to the asymmetrical dominant/dominated relations of the wage-labour nexus) is exactly the area of investigation of the Conventionalist approach. The régulation of this type of relation already involves either the market or politics; Lipietz [1992; 1993; 1999] clearly understands that political régulation is not necessarily "statutory" but (as Tariq Banuri [1992] reminds us) may take the form of face to face community based negotiation.

The contributions of Godard [1993] and Hourcade [1993] are mainly responsible for advancing the Conventionalist-Regulationist approach of the economy of the environment, under fairly specific conditions.

First of all, the forms of régulation of ecological contradictions are still at an early stage. Often there is no agreement on the objectives (the regime to be obtained) or legitimate forms of régulation. We are therefore in a controversial rather than a stable universe, in which the initiatives of today may be invalidated tomorrow by changes in ideas and regulations (contestable legitimacy). The Regulationist-Conventionalist approach can be useful in the field of compromises that are in the process of being institutionalised as well as in the field of persistent differences. This is because it can reveal the relation between the possible instruments to be implemented (quota markets, eco-taxes, norms, prohibitions, moving from the market to the rule) and the results to be expected from the resulting regime. Of course it is obvious that in all cases (even in market creation) the initiative of the political authority must have the required sovereignty available. In the context of this "ex ante Conventionalism" there has been a reinterpretation of the debates on the institutionalisation of future compromises in controversial universes and the precepts of "limited rationality", suggesting a precautionary principle, time gains in apprenticeship and no regret strategies.

This rationalist intellectual framework laid the groundwork for the Rio conference and international negotiations on the greenhouse effect [Godard, 1992; Hourcade, Baron, 1992]. However, they revealed such conflicts of interest, such asymmetries of power and such differences over objectives and values, that they justified a return to analyses in terms of contradictions (particularly North-South) rather than conventions or coordinating rules. In this spirit some economists and geographers (Regulationists and Anglo-Saxon "radicals") understood negotiations over global ecological conflicts (in the context of international research coordinated by UNESCO and WIDER) [Lipietz, 1992; Bhaskar, Glyn, 1994]. In so doing they joined the neo-Structuralist agenda of international relations [Campos de Mello, 1992].

Even if there were agreement on the environmental consequences of a given accumulation regime, the essential issue is that different social and national formations assess the costs for their future destiny involved in the pursuit of possible regimes differently, as well as the costs involved in the implementation of a corresponding mode of régulation. Furthermore, in each social formation, there may be differences between the interests of the various social groups (potential victims of ecological crises) and the interests of an elite involved in negotiations. Thus, while negotiations on the greenhouse effect ought to have opposed the laissez-faire strategy of a "guilty" North to the precautionary strategy of a "victimised" South, the reality is in fact far more complex. Between the two extremes represented by the United States and Bangladesh (whose negotiators conform roughly to this schema) there are the Newly Industrialised Countries which have highly productivist elites. There are also those highly advanced industrial countries which chose a cooperative strategy of capital/labour at the end of the crisis of Fordism and have both the

technological means and the hegemonic ambition to suggest that the rest of the world adopt a strategy of collective precaution in the light of climatic dangers.

Thus, in the geo-strategic field of the global ecology [Lipietz, 1999] some results of research into the wage-labour nexus re-appeared. But it is clear that the search for an institutionalised compromise that is both inter-classist, international and inter-generational will be far more complex than a simple nationally based capital/labour "New Deal"!

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