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Capital, Nature & Society (3)

Regulation, Ecology, Ethics :

The Red-Green Politics of

Alain Lipietz

- Économiste, auteur - Bonnes lectures -



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This text and the publication of [Political Ecology and the Future of Marxism](#) in Capitalism Nature Socialism, n° 39, March 2000 has triggered out a [debate among US ecolomarxist](#).

The complete text of Kerry Whiteside may be uploaded here (pdf, 2.1 Mo) :



sans-titre

1. Introduction

Perhaps the most significant recent attempt to join social theory and ecology in France has occurred in the writings of Alain Lipietz. Affiliated since the 1970s with a research institute concerned with economic planning, Lipietz is known as a leader in the "regulation school" of political economic theory in France. [1] After years of participating in political movements to the left of the Mitterrand's Socialist Party, he decided to join Les Verts (The Greens) in 1988. Within only a few years, he was named spokesperson of the party's economic commission and elected a regional councillor in the Paris region. [2] When Lipietz was recognized as the main author of Les Verts' 1992 economic program, the party's reputation for economic naïveté began to change. [3] In fact, he became one of the most oft-cited members of Les Verts in the popular press. Since 1989, he has written three books and numerous articles combining ecological themes and regulationist analysis.

This essay explores the main tenets of regulation theory and Lipietz's proposed application of it to ecological problems. To link regulation and ecology, he sets forth a Green political program that would be the basis of a "new social compromise." The questions I particularly want to pursue are these : How are ecological values and regulation theory connected ? To what extent can regulationist concepts like "social compromise" and "regimes of accumulation" inform ecological critiques of contemporary society ? From the opposite angle, how do ecological perceptions of the finitude of nature feed into regulationist explanations of social stabilization through negotiated common rules ?

Lipietz is more a social theorist than an ethicist, more focussed on understanding processes of social organization and change than in offering a systematic exposition of normative concepts, premises, and justifications. My objective is to strengthen the ethical dimension of regulationist ecology by sorting through several overlapping interpretations of the connection between social theory and ecological ethics. Regulation theory has wavered unsatisfactorily between what I call Weberian and Hobbesian conceptions of the relation between explanation and evaluation. I argue that Jürgen Habermas' communicative ethics would more convincingly fill in the normative dimension of Lipietz's regulationist ecologism. The practical significance of this ethically elaborated regulationist ecology consists in its orienting ecosocialists towards "universalizing" strategies when dealing with other social actors.

2. Regulation Theory and the Crisis of Fordism

In Vert Espérance (Green Hope), Lipietz recounts the intellectual changes that led him from an ideological mélange of communism and French Maoism to political ecology.

Originally attracted by Marx's revolutionary vision, he jettisoned some features of that perspective when he came to see the failures of communism as failures of theory as well as failures of practice. He no longer believes in the centrality of the workers' movement ; he no longer believes that capitalism is the unique source of all forms of oppression ; he rejects any calls for a centralizing, strictly disciplined party. In his own work, he strives to incorporate

critical insight drawn from diverse oppressed groups " women, gays, peoples of the Third World " and from ecologists. Yet Lipietz also sees his evolution in terms of a core commitment, one which he has only extended through time. Its unifying theme is a "revolt against an unjust economic order, which tears society apart into rich and poor, which sullies nature because it does not even respect human dignity...." [4]

Such a red-green perspective places Lipietz among the more Marxist adherents of regulationism, a post-Keynesian school of economic thought flourishing in France since the 1970s. [5]

Robert Boyer, one of the main proponents of regulation theory, explains that this school's approach originates in a rejection of the methodological individualism of mainstream economics. Methodological individualists explain social phenomena entirely in terms of the features of individuals, irrespective of their place in social categories like class, race, or gender. For example, in explaining where individuals end up in the social division of labor, neoclassical economists may look at factors like the individuals' own choices of education or profession and the demand for certain products constituted by other individuals bidding in the market. In contrast, regulation theorists deny that one can properly understand social phenomena by seeing them merely as the outcome of choices made by autonomous, perfectly rational strategic actors. Regulationists show how socially structured patterns of behavior like wage and commodity relations themselves guide individual choices. Lipietz, who ponders the theory's metaphysical underpinnings more than some of his confrères, begins explicitly from the materialist view that society " particularly production and exchange to meet needs " fashions the motives of individuals. At the same time, needs themselves evolve in the context of struggles between social groups, on the basis of limited resources passed on by previous generations. [6]

The social structures of greatest importance to regulationists are those that make possible the growth of productive capital. Regulation theory describes an economy oriented not toward "general equilibrium," but rather to "phases of expansion and moderate cyclical fluctuations, followed by phases of stagnation and instability." [7] Capital accumulation is not a smooth, self-governing process ; it is beset with recurring crises of overproduction, unemployment, and social turmoil. So it is the stability and reproduction of socio-economic systems, not their crises per se, that most urgently require explanation. Regulationists hypothesize that it is a "mode of regulation" that mitigates disorder in a "regime of accumulation." [8] Lipietz adds that a particular "model of work organization" governing the division of labor and structures of authority within firms form an integral part of a stable "model of development."

To study a "regime of accumulation" is to examine at a macroeconomic level how production (mechanization, importance of different sectors of the economy, worker productivity) and the composition of the social product (for personal consumption, investment, trade, etc.) co-evolve and support each other. [9] Given the conflictual nature of capitalist development, however, a regime's longevity depends on a "mode of regulation" to become stable. "Regulation" goes far beyond the American sense of government intervention to correct potential market failures or to control monopolies. The French term designates a variety of social mechanisms which attenuate conflicts within a set of social relations, allowing those relations to reproduce. A mode of regulation includes behavioral norms (e.g., to see certain forms of workplace hierarchy as legitimate) ; welfare legislation ; union contracts ; and state-mandated safety regulations. [10]

Under what conditions are such arrangements created ? Conflict is transformed " always temporarily " into social reproduction when competing groups arrive at a set of compromises over how to organize the production and distribution of social goods. In their struggle for advantage, groups eventually press each other to accept limits, rules, procedures, divisions of territory, and rights and duties. Social mobilization and negotiated settlements, backed up by state-sanctioned rules, help steady the regime. Its contradictions temporarily tamed, capital accumulation then proceeds apace until new crises force further adjustments.

According to this model of social explanation, stability is won through the creation of "hegemonic historical blocs." [11]

A regime of accumulation typically gives disproportionate advantages to certain groups. Yet widespread, voluntary acceptance of its institutions and norms is crucial to its stability. Lipietz draws on Pierre Bourdieu's notion of "habitus" to explain how a regime fosters "appropriate" individual expectations about work, consumption, life chances and so forth ; these dispositions help fit most individuals smoothly into social roles functional to the regime. [12] The state furthers this process of normalization by putting its legitimizing imprimatur on the compromises and customs that form the hegemonic system. So the state must not be seen merely as the tool of a regime's privileged groups. As the guarantor of numerous social compromises, the state mediates conflicts. In this role, it protects rights and material advantages won through struggle even by less privileged groups. Only in this way can it maintain the regime of accumulation as a whole.

Still, nothing guarantees the long-term success of such efforts. A regime of accumulation may eventually be unable to fulfill all of the expectations it creates ; changes in technology, trade, or available resources may cause unforeseen friction between the pieces of the hegemonic system. Indeed, this is to be expected, since regulation only lessens social tensions, it does not eliminate them. At best, it creates "armistices" within class struggles. Capitalist "extortion of surplus value," for example, remains. [13] A crisis occurs when the system of regulation shows itself unable to stem problems like mounting productivity losses, trade deficits, and sociopolitical turmoil. Social actors then search for the terms of a new compromise, one better able to manage the accumulated tensions of the previous regime.

Most regulationists apply this general schema for understanding social change to the political economy of post-war Europe and the U.S. Lipietz especially contends that, since the late 1960s, crisis has unsettled the "Fordist" social compromises that underwrote prosperity after World War II. In *Choisir l'audace*, he explains the nature of the crisis and, for the first time in his major writings, links it to ecological concerns.

He argues that what sustained the relative social peace and economic resurgence of most industrialized Western countries after World War II was a "Fordist" regime of accumulation. Fordism couples a model of work organization based on high levels of mechanization and Taylorist "rationalization" [14] with agreements to distribute the fruits of economic growth widely within the nation. The first element of Fordism disadvantaged workers. It devalued their knowledge of the production process gained on the shop floor, making work less fulfilling. It made workers more easily replaceable, potentially lowering wages. The resulting possibilities of labor unrest and declining productivity made a second element of Fordism essential. In compensation for their diminished position in the workplace, workers demanded that capital redistribute more of its profits to them. [15] They sought full employment as the norm of national economic policy and they supported the construction of a welfare state. Achieving these objectives brought the Fordist regime of accumulation to its equilibrium position. Labor's higher wages and job security, far from undermining competitive capitalism, actually stabilized it, assuring outlets for its productivity gains. In the 1930s and 1940s, from the American New Deal to the Scandinavian social democracies to the French model of economic planning, governments oversaw the compromises that attenuated tensions between capital and labor. By combining free enterprise with union contracts, extensive government regulation and welfare policies, a workable compromise was struck "at least, for a time."

The eventual breakdown of this agreement follows, in part, from its own internal logic. The system unravels because its field of incentives generates long-term behavioral consequences contrary to its own premises. Increasing mechanization and computerized production, subcontracting of manual labor to areas where wages are low "these strategies, says Lipietz, only exacerbate Taylorism : workers whose knowledge and talents are excluded from their firms' organizational plans become less productive. Diminished profit brings diminished investment "and eventually unemployment and reduced tax revenues for the welfare state. Meanwhile, the growing internationalization of trade worsens the crisis. Heightened competition between the U.S., Europe, and Japan brings calls for rolling back regulation at the national level. In the West, wages that once intensified demand and helped finance the welfare state suffer downward pressure.

In the 1980s, Reagan and Thatcher sought to counter the economic slowdown by "freeing up rigidities" in the market. Production could be stimulated, they believed, if the state allowed capital a freer hand in dealing with labor, and if the state reduced its attempts to regulate workplaces and trimmed the welfare state. But these strategies, too, are inherently unstable. Reducing state economic intervention boosts production only by exacerbating trends toward social inequality. And deficit spending, which financed Reagan's military build-up, only temporarily stimulated the economy. [16] Eventually deficits drive up interest rates, thus discouraging capital investment and slowing growth also. In all of these cases "productivity losses, globalized markets, diminished state intervention in markets" Lipietz demonstrates how current economic trends undermine the mode of regulation that made the Fordist regime of accumulation work.

[1] Lipietz's first books, *Le Tribut foncier urbain* (Paris : Maspéro, 1974) and *Le capital et son espace* (Paris : Maspéro, 1977), reflect his specialization in urban political economy. His reputation as a leading figure of regulationism developed with a series of controversial books in the mid-eighties, including *Le Monde Enchanté : De la valeur à l'envol inflationniste* (Paris : Maspéro, 1983) ; *Mirages et Miracles : Problèmes de l'industrialisation dans le Tiers-Monde* (Paris : La Découverte, 1985) ; *L'Audace ou l'enlèvement : Sur les politiques économiques de la gauche* (Paris : La Découverte, 1985). [\(retour au texte\)](#)

[2] Sophie Gher, "L'itinéraire d'un économiste 'vert'," *Le Monde*, 22-23 mars 1992. [\(retour au texte\)](#)

[3] "Les Verts contre le 'productivisme'," *Le Figaro*, 25 février 1992 ; "Les propositions économiques des Verts remettent en cause la 'logique productiviste'," *Le Monde*, 26 février 1992 ; "Les Ecologistes dans le débat économique," *La Tribune de l'Expansion*, 11 mars 1992. [\(retour au texte\)](#)

[4] Alain Lipietz, *Vert Espérance : L'avenir de l'écologie politique* (Paris : La Découverte, 1993), p. 7. [\(retour au texte\)](#)

[5] It should be emphasized that regulation theory is uniform neither ideologically nor in terms of explanatory hypotheses about phenomena like transformations in wage relations. See Robert Boyer, *The Regulation School : A Critical Introduction*, trans. by Craig Charney (New York : Columbia University Press, 1990), pp. 22-24. Lipietz himself criticizes one of the founders of regulationism, Michel Aglietta, for taking a "leap backward" from Marxism toward a more individualist theory. See Alain Lipietz, "De la régulation aux conventions : Le grand bond en arrière ?," *Actuel Marx*, 1994. Lipietz, in turn, is the target of Marxists who detect too little attention to "political exclusions" or a tendency toward "institutionalist determinism." See Julie Graham, "Fordism/Post-Fordism, Marxism/Post-Marxism : The Second Cultural Divide ?," *Rethinking Marxism*, 4, 1, Spring, 1991, pp. 49, 53 ; and John Bellamy Foster, "The Fetish of Fordism," *Monthly Review*, March, 1988, pp. 29-30. [\(retour au texte\)](#)

[6] Alain Lipietz, "Reflections on a Tale : The Marxist Foundations of the Concepts of Regulation and Accumulation," *Studies in Political Economy*, 26, 1978, pp. 12-14. [\(retour au texte\)](#)

[7] Boyer, op. cit., p. 13. [\(retour au texte\)](#)

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 14, and Alain Lipietz, "A Regulationist Approach to the Future of Urban Ecology," *CNS*, 3, 3, 1992, p. 103. [\(retour au texte\)](#)

[9] Alain Lipietz, *Choisir l'audace : Une alternative pour le XXIe siècle* (Paris : Editions La Découverte, 1989), p. 16. [\(retour au texte\)](#)

[10] Like David Gordon, Richard Edwards and Michael Reich, Lipietz links cycles in capital accumulation with changes in the organization of the labor process. However, Gordon et al. tend to make the labor control system the single most crucial variable in the development of capital (*Segmented Work, Divided Workers : the Historical Transformation of Labor in the United States* [Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1982]). They have been criticized for giving too little attention to other factors such as state policy and monetary and banking systems "factors" which Lipietz's concept of a "model of development" embraces. [\(retour au texte\)](#)

[11] Lipietz builds upon the work of Antonio Gramsci and Nicos Poulantzas in formulating this concept. See Alain Lipietz, "Building an Alternative Movement in France," *Rethinking Marxism*, 1, 3, 1988, p. 82. [\(retour au texte\)](#)

[12] Alain Lipietz, "Rebel Sons : The Regulation School," an interview with Alain Lipietz conducted by Jane Jenson, *French Politics and Society*, 5, 1987, p. 18. [\(retour au texte\)](#)

[13] Lipietz, "De la régulation aux conventions," op. cit., p. 41. [\(retour au texte\)](#)

[14] Frederick Taylor's *Principles of Scientific Management* (1911) spelled out methods to increase the productivity of laborers, including separating those who design production processes from those who execute them, implementing time-motion studies of workers, simplifying and standardizing production routines. [\(retour au texte\)](#)

[15] The following analysis of the crisis of Fordism draws principally on Lipietz, *Choisir l'audace*, op. cit., pp. 17-58. [\(retour au texte\)](#)

[16] It should be noted that high levels of military spending and social cohesion inspired by fear of war do not fit well in the regulationist model of social stabilization. Sorting out the relative impact on social stabilization of each set of factors – the military and the regulatory – would be an valuable line of research that, to my knowledge, no regulationist has yet attempted. [\(retour au texte\)](#)