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Regulation, Ecology, Ethics :

The Red-Green Politics of

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4. Regulationist Ecology : From Hobbes to Habermas

How then might regulationist social theory and ecological ethics be brought into closer relation with one another ?

I want to argue that the best hope for combining Lipietz's empirical and ethical projects lies in the notion of "compromise" – provided that that notion is interpreted in a Habermasian, not a Hobbesian sense. The problem is that Lipietz's writings can support both interpretations.

A "Hobbesian" perspective posits a minimum ethical content in regulationist understandings of social stabilization. Regulation theory, with its emphasis on negotiated settlements of conflict, validates a view of human existence in which the preservation of life, material welfare, and social peace take precedence over, say, spiritual commitments or some particular understanding of distributive justice. In contrast to those who say "no justice, no peace," regulation theory says that social peace requires no particular view of justice. And that, as Thomas Hobbes understood already in the 17th century, is (the beginning of) an ethical theory. It is an ethical theory claiming that perfectionist ideals of "the good life" actually breed conflict and fear. Since no perfectionist ethical consensus is really possible (says Hobbes), those who act as if it were end up locked in perpetual battle to vindicate their views. Mankind's "natural condition" is, in the pessimist's famous phrase, a "war of everyman against everyman." Peace is achieved only in a "covenant." Finally persuaded that a secure life is preferable to constant, unwinnable war, each person accepts a compromise : I will not press my claims for (my own conception of) what is right provided that you do likewise. In Hobbes' view, it is better – morally better, better for all – to get the benefits of "commodious living" that a peaceful society affords than it is to pursue perfectionist demands on society.

Lipietz's view is strikingly similar. Suggesting that life might be viewed as "a state of nature," he repeats the regulationist claim that "contradictory social relations are the result....They create unity through struggle and this struggle is the very essence of the social bond. Hence, struggle is the basis of everything." [1] Like Hobbes, regulationism holds that conflict is the primary fact of social life. Thus the challenge for social theory is to explain how any durable form of human organization is possible. Regulation theory's key hypothesis, like Hobbes's, is that only compromise can check society's underlying tendency toward discord. The potential agents of disorder must internalize a conviction that institutional arrangements far short of their own ideals nevertheless serve their interests better than a continuing struggle. And when Lipietz says "struggle is the basis of everything" he aligns regulationism with the Hobbesian ethical insight that compromise constitutes moral standards. A regime of accumulation, he says, promotes "the interiorization...of a certain representation of social reality and of norms of behavior...." [2] A stabilizing compromise acquires normative hegemony.

If this is the implicit ethical standpoint of regulation theory, then its turn to ecological politics is going to be problematic, for numerous reasons.

1. Lipietz's explicit ecological ethics and the implicit Hobbesian ethics of regulationism substantially contradict one another. Ecological ethics, as Lipietz proposes it, is perfectionist. It suggests that a good human life grows out of forms of social solidarity that embody ecologically sustainable patterns of development. The problem is, the Hobbesian interpretation of regulation theory requires one to set aside claims that ecological responsibility makes special demands on humankind's conscience. Suppose, for example, that we had to choose : either more material goods combined with a serious greenhouse effect or fewer material goods and no greenhouse effect. Like many eco-theorists, Lipietz argues that we must moderate our appetite for material satisfaction in order to protect the

environment. Expect advocates of endless growth to argue, in contrast, that even if there is a greenhouse effect, it would cost less to move populations inland, build dikes, adapt crops to hotter weather. Which perspective wins, the ecological or the economic, is a matter of group struggle. This is tantamount to giving the two options moral equivalence. The urgency of ecological politics is lost.

2. This interpretation also gives up any grounds for objecting that a particular compromise was unjust because it was based on coercion. Lipietz knows this problem too well to let it pass from view. As a tiers-mondiste, he constantly decries the scandal of the wealthy, profligate North dictating austerity and environmental protection policies to the destitute South. Third World countries may accept such policies only because they have unjustly been made absolute conditions of loans and foreign aid. No true compromise, this. But when Lipietz protests such arrangements, he invokes substantive principles grounded in something other than prior compromises. He starts from moral premises which Hobbesian regulation theory would deny him.

3. Nor can this variant of contactarianism question the genuineness or legitimacy of the contending groups' beliefs. Thus, it risks endorsing "compromises" that a dominant group manufactured by shaping the ideas of a subordinate group. Of course, devising an independent standard for genuine beliefs is fraught with difficulties of its own. Lipietz may resort to the Hobbesian contract out of skepticism about the prospects for discovering such a standard. But it is particularly unexpected to encounter this problem in regulation theory, because it both wants to show how a mode of regulation depends on "hegemonic" shaping of customs and routines by dominant groups and to deny that current hegemonic values are the best ones. If "productivism [the habitus of our mode of development] has spread over the entire planet" [3] while Lipietz sets himself up as a critic of its ecological consequences, he sets forth moral criteria for a "good" compromise whose existence the Hobbesian interpretation of regulation theory negates.

4. Finally, this interpretation of regulation theory seems to rely on an understanding of human motivation often challenged by ecologism. Hobbes argued that some matters, like religious belief, artistic taste, or ethics, were too subjective to ground consensus ; the desire for physical security and material well-being, on the other hand, is both universal and powerful. Therefore, this desire could motivate a social contract to which all could adhere. Now, regulationism does not explicitly postulate that, given a choice between more products to be privately consumed and more free time to be enjoyed conversing with others, most people will opt for material consumption. Nonetheless, Lipietz's examples do nothing to dispel the impression that those sorts of motivations really are dominant. What long stabilized the Fordist regime of accumulation, according to his analysis, was its ability to respond to contending groups' demands for access to the material fundamentals of human welfare : income, security, work and leisure. Lipietz seems all too aware that "Fordism" brought relative social peace by integrating workers as "a crowd of consumers" into the productivist system. [4] The Hobbesian interpretation of regulationism might then suggest that new, ecologically-sound compromises that institutionalize reduced material consumption will be politically unstable. Regulationism would be the basis, not of green hope, but of green despair.

My contention is that these objections would be lifted if regulation theory could be plausibly interpreted as a concrete application of Habermasian communicative ethics. Communicative ethics distinguishes between compromise understood as "a balance of power" — the Hobbesian interpretation — and compromise as an agreement incorporating "norms [that] express generalizable interests." [5] Interpreted in this second sense, regulation theory would express neither a subjective decision to favor egalitarian values nor a Hobbesian preference for life and material welfare. Rather, it would issue from a respect for individuals as autonomous, mutually communicating moral agents, capable of evaluating their own circumstances and of negotiating social arrangements that embody a rational consensus. From the point of view of discursive ethics, people meeting in search of compromise are not bundles of power pitted against one another ; they are communicative actors seeking to provide universal justification for their claims about the good of their community. Merely by engaging in this dialogue, they implicitly accept others as equals, as agents who can understand and act according to general moral rules.

Thus Lipietz's commitments to equality and individual autonomy could be seen not merely as contingent outcomes of

compromise but as necessary ethical presuppositions of the bargaining situation. The concept of an "ideal speech situation" — one in which participants reach their conclusions only through "a rational redemption of justified claims" — furnishes a standard to disqualify "compromises" that were the result of coercion or ideological manipulation. Communicative ethics would also fit well with Lipietz's tiers mondisme, since its conception of generalizable interests would require us to seek ecological policies that respected inhabitants of all parts of the globe equally. Regulation theory-as-communicative ethics could explain why the idea of a "social compromise" deserves to be at the center of social theory.

Does this emphasis on the ethical presuppositions of dialogue deny the regulationist premise that conflict is the norm of human existence ? Only if one holds that conflict ultimately constitutes ethical standards. No communicative ethicist denies that struggle between social forces has been the vehicle of ethical change. What separates the Habermasian from the Hobbesian, however, is the former's conviction that moral standards are not simply those of the victor in the struggle. Habermas formulates a minimal ethics that can be used to judge the positions of contending groups without adopting the explicit values of either victors or vanquished. Lipietz clearly presupposes such a judgmental position when he promotes green values. But the question is : how could he account philosophically for this position ? My complaint is that the regulationist language of struggle, compromise, and hegemonic values invites a Hobbesian interpretation that is at odds with Lipietz's own moral convictions. What makes the Habermasian interpretation a superior alternative is not only that it affirms the same ethical standards that Lipietz promotes, but that it does so by extracting those standards from the very processes that regulationism makes central to its analyses of social change : the processes of negotiation and compromise.

Habermas' writings make sense of an even bolder claim that Lipietz has advanced about the prospects for diverse new social movements converging toward "a single will for change." Seeking an agent of social change and yet rejecting both traditional Marxist hopes for a universal class and a simple conglomeration of protest groups, Lipietz concludes that "the only solution is thus to work towards the maturation of a 'shared meaning,' an alternative culture... so that each can recognize in it not only their own direct interests, but equally the interest that each has for others to find their interest there too." [6] Evidently Lipietz aims at a social order suffused with "mature" feelings of reciprocity and community, not merely a grudging willingness to trade-off advantages. The ethical basis of regulationism is neither mere consensus nor some conception of goodness independent of worldly concerns. It is the extension of interest — interest enlarged and enriched through the development of interactive competence.

Explaining how such a maturation of shared meaning is possible is central to Habermas' work, *The Theory of Communicative Action*. [7] Going beyond extracting moral guidelines from the structures of communication, discursive ethics sees history as a learning process in which humankind accumulates knowledge about the conditions of its fullest emancipation — conditions which require ever more completely shared meaning. Only recently have (some) societies (very imperfectly) learned to quell conflict by recognizing the humanity of workers, tolerating ethnic diversity, equalizing economic opportunities, democratizing political structures. These values are not merely elements of the most recent social compromise — ones that are morally incommensurable with those of preceding compromises. These are advances in humankind's ability to abide by norms of reciprocal accountability. History, in other words, reveals progress in our moral consciousness as well as in the area of technical-instrumental knowledge.

This approach is not only normative ; as social theory, it offers an important hypothesis about why certain social structures are more stable than others, and hence how social change can take a particular, progressive direction. Modernity, according to Habermas, embodies a "rationalizing" project. As societies try to enhance their capacity for material reproduction, they also find their diverse members interpreting their needs within that system and subjecting them to discursive testing. Along with technological sophistication, societies develop their collective identities in ways that express higher degrees of communicative competence. Discursive testing subjects the society's practices to critical questioning : are its distributive principles capable of being "communicatively shared" ? Are they based on generalizable human interests ? Do they encourage critical reflection among citizens ? Failure to meet such testing

motivates system instability, as social actors search to reshape the social system according to more rationally defensible norms. The Habermasian view makes us see that what constitutes "crisis" is not merely a dysfunctioning system ; it is a delegitimated system. More than that : delegitimation occurs because the system fails to meet the evolving norms of social actors who are becoming increasingly competent at criticizing myths and justifications serving partial interests " not just because it violates expectations that it created. Sharing meaning is not merely a goal for which groups decide to struggle ; it is a rational imperative.

There is a significant obstacle to reading regulationism in this way : Lipietz himself appears to reject this interpretation categorically. He specifically repudiates any view of history as a movement through a staged series of social transformations that spontaneously generates an ethically preferred resolution of a community's contradictions. [8] Teleology in this sense, he maintains, is only an illusion. Reflecting on the disappointed hopes raised by Marx, Lipietz concludes :

Progressivism needs to be reinvented. It can no longer count on the movement of history, on the development of technique and knowledge, it can no longer be satisfied with praising modernity.... Henceforth, progressivism must always be on the side of the poor in the name of an ethic of solidarity....it must take a stand in favor of an other modernity.... [9]

If regulation theory makes it appear that the pieces of a model of development fit together as if they were "made for" each other, this is only because it is an "a posteriori functionalism." [10] A contingent process of struggle, negotiation, and accomodation has worn off the pieces' rough edges, permitting the theorist to see retrospectively how they join together in a self-perpetuating structure of social relations. No particular compromise is historically preferred ; "notions of 'reform' and revolution' are thus relativized." [11] Compromise is simply whatever accomodations various groups have settled on in their search to mitigate conflict. Such remarks force us back to the Weberian, or perhaps the Hobbesian, interpretation.

And yet, those interpretations simply fail to translate many of Lipietz's theoretical claims. Most obviously, he does appear to believe in some notion of ethical progress. Lipietz is clearly more sympathetic to the Fordist compromise, with its commitment to full employment and welfare state protections, than to its predecessor. He clearly thinks that work is more fulfilling when it engages a variety of talents than when Taylorist methods strip it down to the most efficient motions. Today, he urges Europe to take the lead in putting forth "better compromises" between economic activity and environmental preservation, just as it earlier led the way to "better compromises between capital and labor." [12] In moving from one mode of regulation to another, ethical advance is possible.

I would contend, moreover, that when Lipietz speaks of "better compromises," he is implicitly paralleling a Habermasian argument that moral imperatives for change grow out of our experience with the irrationalities of existing institutional arrangements. Lipietz argues that the Fordist compromise has been in crisis since the late 1960s, because (among other reasons) workers whose jobs are precarious and whose workplace-acquired technical expertise is systematically ignored become less productive. He maintains that its productivist commitment to unlimited economic growth generates so much waste and pollution that people eventually come to demand more environmental protection. "At the end of the eighties," he writes, "the rising social, macroeconomic, and ecological perils are belatedly provoking a new awareness," which supports "more advanced social compromises." [13]

Such awareness results from a "dynamic extension of an altruistic consciousness." [14] His plea to include future generations, the Third World, and nature in our ethical deliberations is a fine example of what Habermas calls "the expansion of the domain of consensual interaction." [15] Lipietz warns that, failing this extension of moral consciousness, we face a future of environmental war between North and South. If we continue to buy into liberal-productivism, with its blinkered, individualistic moral vantage point, we sanction social polarization and should expect social unrest in response. What is this to say but that a model of development can provoke internal tensions

because of its failure to incorporate the interests of many whom it affects ? Failure motivates a search for more adequate norms, ones expressing more generalizable interests.

Why not say then that we are in the midst of an historical learning process "one that is unfinished but is still ethically progressive ? Perhaps Lipietz worries that such a vision of ethical progress sweeps human freedom aside with historical determinism, or that it could be misused to legitimate an authoritarian politics in which those who know the direction of historical change command others who are less enlightened. Yet neither concern applies to Habermas' schema. There is no inevitability in enlightenment ; the possibility of failure haunts every free being. Just as in the maturation of a personality, there will be instances of failure and possibly even regression in social development. Today's resurgence of ethnic tribalism and growing social inequalities should be seen in this light. Habermas describes only the most general contours of the historical learning process, not its status at every moment. This process, moreover, is the outcome of communicative interaction among diversely situated groups, not the foreseeable goal of any one of them. No elite can claim privileged knowledge of society's ethical evolution.

Why not say then that Fordism was one, temporarily workable stage in humankind's search for a social order, one that was relatively equitable and responsive to the needs of many ? In time, however, accumulated experience revealed the instability and partiality of this system, too "its inability to extend a commitment to fair distribution, its tendency to destroy or to dirty the very resources on which it depends to feed production. Lipietz favors "alternative movements" (e.g., environmentalists, feminists, multiculturalists) that offer up ethically-motivated prescriptions of "what 'the new world should be'." According to the interpretation I have been building, there are grounds for a much stronger claim. In Habermasian terms, one would say that these movements, sparked by the dysfunctions of prevailing exclusionary or ecologically unsustainable social practices, challenge defenders of those practices to meet the test of the generalizability of their interests. Like those before them who opposed slavery or imperialism, they are agents for the advance of historical reason, challenging the rationality of certain strategies of socio-economic development. An audacious claim : quite so. Nonetheless, it comes closer than the alternatives to unifying the ethical and social theoretical ideas of regulationism.

[1] Lipietz, "Reflections on a Tale," op. cit., p. 13. [\(retour au texte\)](#)

[2] Ibid., p. 20. [\(retour au texte\)](#)

[3] Lipietz, Choisir l'audace, op. cit., p. 65. [\(retour au texte\)](#)

[4] Ibid., p. 23 ; cf. p. 48. [\(retour au texte\)](#)

[5] Jürgen Habermas, Legitimation Crisis, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston : Beacon Press, 1975), p. 111. [\(retour au texte\)](#)

[6] Lipietz, "Building an Alternative Movement in France," op. cit., p. 95, emphasis added. [\(retour au texte\)](#)

[7] Jürgen Habermas, The Theory of Communicative Action, Volume 1, Reason and the Rationalization of Society, trans. by T. McCarthy (Boston : Beacon Press, 1984). [\(retour au texte\)](#)

[8] Lipietz, "Rebel Sons," op. cit., p. 22. [\(retour au texte\)](#)

[9] Lipietz, Vert Esperance, pp. 116-117. [\(retour au texte\)](#)

[10] Lipietz, "Reflections on a Tale," op. cit., p. 35. [\(retour au texte\)](#)

[11] Lipietz, "Building an Alternative Movement in France," op. cit., p. 83. [\(retour au texte\)](#)

[12] Alain Lipietz, Berlin, Bagdad, Rio (Paris : Quai Voltaire, 1992), p. 124. [\(retour au texte\)](#)

[13] Lipietz, Choisir L'audace, op. cit., p. 153. [\(retour au texte\)](#)

[14] Lipietz, Vert Espérance, op. cit., p. 18. [\(retour au texte\)](#)

[15] Jürgen Habermas, Communication and the Evolution of Society, trans. by Thomas McCarthy (Boston : Beacon Press, 1979), p. 120. [\(retour au texte\)](#)