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Capital, Nature & Society (3)

Regulation, Ecology, Ethics :

The Red-Green Politics of

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5. Conclusion : Nature and Compromise

Before reaching ecological conclusions, however, this analysis must surmount one additional obstacle.

While an historical learning process might explain how, through a refined ability to take the perspective of the other, human communities acquire a universalistic moral sensibility with respect to interpersonal relations, it is still difficult to understand in what sense we might include "nature" in that sensibility. What sort of reciprocal accountability can there be between human and non-human communities ?

There is some evidence that, as Lipietz has become more taken with ecology, he has begun to perceive that "nature" may be more difficult to assimilate in any regulationist model of social relations than he first thought. In 1989, ecological concerns enter as the fifth chapter of his book analyzing the decline of Fordism and the impasse of liberal productivism. Environmental problems appear not as an essential motive for the crisis of Fordism, but as an additional constraint on any solution to the problems of rising unemployment and increasing difficulties in financing the welfare state. The crisis of Fordism is first and foremost a crisis of declining production. In the absence of environmental problems, it seems that Lipietz would have proposed agreements between capital and labor to restructure work organization, increase production and distribute its benefits more fairly. But now, because environmental systems are overburdened, he rules out solutions calling for increased material production. Lipietz insists that the capital's quid pro quo for workers should not be more purchasing power, but rather more free time. Remaining within the regulationist perspective means envisioning a new compromise — a sort of social contract — assuring all interested parties that their interests have been taken into account in their society's key distributive decisions.

Three years later, Lipietz fires this criticism at the liberal social contract tradition :

Political ecology raises problems that no social contract...can solve. Thou shalt not kill — whom ?... "Your partners in the social contract," respond secular thinkers. Fine. But then, what about species of wild animals ?...And future generations of human beings ? "After me, the deluge" responds the individualist who founds his ethics on "self-interest rightly understood." No expressed interest : no social contract. [1]

The same words have a dangerous potential to ricochet and wound regulationist ecology.

Before it was extended to ecology, there was nothing theoretically incoherent about viewing social systems as modes of development stabilized by multiple negotiated arrangements linking workers, employers, and the state. The stabilizing factors that regulationists typically study — workplace organization, wages, availability of capital, social "safety net" legislation — are matters of intergroup bargaining. Workers who cannot tolerate the pace of the production line resort to industrial action to force management to slow it down. Managers who believe that workers' wages endanger profitability attempt to get workers to accept reduced earnings. Systemic balance results from achieving a "compromise" among all the interested parties in the society.

That pattern of argument does not apply so well to the issues of ecological politics. Animal species, pristine territories, and future generations can no more be present in social bargaining sessions than they are in liberal fantasies of a hypothetical contract. They cannot sit at a bargaining table or destabilize institutions by marching in the

streets of Paris. How can we conceive ecological goals in regulationist terms when the potentially disadvantaged "parties" lack the capacity to represent their own interests ?

This is precisely the complaint that certain "ecocentric" theorists lodge against more "humanistic" ecologists. Robyn Eckersley, for example, charges that a communicative ethics "is unable to work the interests of nonhumans into [its] theory in any meaningful way because it is theoretically grounded in human speech acts." [2] Whatever Habermas' success in discovering a transcendental commitment to equal respect in the very act of communicating, his model of ethical discovery cannot cover our relations with nature since natural objects are not partners in discourse. Because humanistic moral systems aim at human emancipation, they cannot adequately express ecological demands to respect nonhuman, external nature. Lipietz's call for a "dynamic extension of an altruistic consciousness" virtually concedes that such an ecocentric critique poses a problem for a regulationist approach to ecological politics. Presumably, he believes that, with the human conscience suitably extended, we will bring nature into our political negotiations, thereafter following out the regulationist model of social stabilization. Ecologized political movements will inject demands for reduced material consumption and ecologically responsible development in the Third World into the negotiations that elaborate the social compromise. Yet the ideas of "extension" and "altruism" end up distorting regulation theory in order to get it to encompass ecological concerns. After all, a social reformer in the early 20th century might have asked capitalists to "extend their altruism" and identify more with the needs of their workers — e.g., give them shorter hours, health insurance. Regulation theory (rightly I think) places little faith in such remedies. The Fordist compromise was hammered out through strikes, protests, hard-fought electoral battles. Workers pushed through recognition of their needs in spite of the profit-maximizing ethic of their employers. Regulation theory's emphasis on the conflictual nature of group relations leaves little room for good will as a source of social stability. If Lipietz covers ecological concerns primarily by appealing to altruism, it is hard to see that he is still in the regulationist framework.

On the other hand, Steven K. White sees grounds within Habermas' recent works for connecting an historicized communicative ethics and ecology. Surely it is more than an accident of group struggle that more and more people have developed interests in the protection and restoration of the environment. White proposes seeing "growing environmental crises....as a practical catalyst for reflection on how the ways in which we currently assault nature are leading to a more and more frustrating and self-destructive form of life." It is plausible to argue that they have developed these interests because the widespread destruction of nature has activated a sense of loss or aesthetic distress or fear of dangers to health. The advance of technical-instrumental knowledge puts nature at ever greater risk, but also creates the conditions for our becoming more aware of the severity and implications of that risk. Alarm about the global effects of technology and demands for wilderness preservation or protection of species now have entered into political deliberations at one time almost monopolized by the quest to maximize production or to distribute social goods fairly. Those who share these concerns then begin "experimenting with alternative forms of life and technology...[with a] potential for enhancement of a sense of balance or harmony with natural systems." Thus, critical reflection and aesthetic yearnings could prompt an expanded "sense of what makes for human satisfaction and well-being ;" no reference to the problematic ecocentric notion of valuing of nature for its own sake is necessary. [3]

Yet the moral status of these interests can only be assured, according to the Habermasian perspective, through their universalization under the impact of discursive testing. And that too plausibly describes developments in ecological politics. Lipietz's description of what transpired at the 1992 UN Conference for Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro offers a vivid example. [4] At that conference, Bush administration representatives balked at having the United States accept limitations on emissions of greenhouse gasses. They then found themselves facing questions in areas hitherto largely ignored in international negotiation. Not just the brute danger of atmospheric warming, but the injustice of the distribution of risk was raised. How can the U.S. justify contributing vastly more per capita to this danger than many other nations, and yet not accept proportionately greater responsibility for reducing the risk ? Doesn't the American position demonstrate unjustifiable insensitivity to others' interests ? Doesn't it assume unequal rights to create and bear risk ?

To put the questions this way is to illustrate how ecological concerns become subject to discursive processes presupposing Habermas' higher order ethical orientation. They hold up each nation's conduct to tests of logical comprehensiveness, consistency, and respect for equality. Moreover, discursive testing at the conference invoked notions of need and luxury to distinguish the moral defensibility of the practices causing those emissions (e.g. automobile driving versus cultivating rice). Wouldn't a commitment to reciprocity have to acknowledge that, under many conditions, some forms of consumption take moral precedence over others ? White's extrapolation of Habermas' theory leads us to see ecological consciousness emerging through such dialogical examination. Ecologism then is a contemporary manifestation of the process of historical moral development that leads us to integrate a greater variety of conflicting claims into a generalized perspective of justice and well-being.

This interpretation shows how Lipietz's environmentalist "altruism" fits into a theoretical framework emphasizing compromises in human interests. Concern for the survival of diverse species, preservationist sentiment regarding pristine territories, and so forth develop out of humankind's critical-reflective quest to situate itself more satisfactorily in relation to nature. Heretofore human interest was interpreted largely in terms of dominating nature in order to satisfy physical desires. But our very success at such domination has revealed (at least to some) that it is possible to go too far, that an overexploited nature endangers our communities at the levels of bodily well-being, social justice, and aesthetic satisfaction. An ecological ethic does not take shape merely through a contingent process of group struggle and compromise or through the assertion of an "ecocentric" good will. What Lipietz calls "altruism" is really a human interest in nature that is becoming more articulated through collective deliberations in which the criteria of communicative competence come into play.

Both Habermasian critical theory and regulationism stand to gain from understanding the convergence of their lines of inquiry. Habermas has written only sketchily on ecological politics and his works are often criticized for being written at a very high level of abstraction. After multiplying the tasks of an immense "research program," he often speaks only vaguely of actual events or of the institutions of an alternative politics. I am suggesting that Lipietz's regulationism contributes to Habermasian theory by concretely exemplifying its tenets "and by decisively extending its analysis in the direction of ecological politics. Regulationist ecology exposes the socio-economic mechanisms that drive what Habermas calls one-sided modernization processes "ones that allow the process of capital accumulation to impoverish political-ethical discourse, to drain away social and natural diversity. Conversely, drawing on communicative ethics gives regulationist ecologism the consistent ethical bearings that it needs to guide us toward "better compromises." Without such bearings, it risks appearing arbitrary or uncertain when negotiating with representatives of productivism, who are themselves prepared to deploy any argument to protect their privileges.

What does this advance in theory mean for eco-socialist practice ? The joining of critical theory and regulationism suggests that political ecologists do best to develop practices that are designed to make evident the universality of ecological responsibility. By building on ethical intuitions and institutions already partly acknowledged, they should pursue attempts to forge a more inclusive and consistent "generalizable" understanding of humankind's interest in protecting the natural world. Following Lipietz's call for international regulatory compromises, a conference like the one in Rio is an indispensable forum in which ecosocialists, whether in negotiations or in the media or in the streets, can highlight the irrationality of practices that reflect only national egoism. But if they are to represent a morally compelling alternative to national egoism, a conception of potentially universalizable interests needs to inform the arguments that they voice and the institutions that they target.

[1] Lipietz, Vert Espérance, op. cit., p. 16. [\(retour au texte\)](#)

[2] Robyn Eckersley, Environmentalism and Political Theory (Albany : SUNY Press, 1992), p. 111. [\(retour au texte\)](#)

[3] Stephen K.White, The Recent Work of Jürgen Habermas : Reason, Justice and Modernity (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1988),

pp. 137-138. [\(retour au texte\)](#)

[4] Lipietz, Berlin, Bagdad, Rio, op. cit., pp. 107-120. [\(retour au texte\)](#)