Political and Ecological Communication

JOHN S. DRYZEK

Democracy is a matter of effective communication, not just preference aggregation. Normally it is only communication among humans about human interests that is at issue. But democracy can also exist or be denied in human dealings with the natural world. Ecological democratisation is therefore a matter of better integration of political and ecological communication. Principles of ecological democracy can be used both to criticise existing institutional arrangements, and to inspire a search for alternative institutions that would better integrate politics and ecology.

We can, I believe, best explore the prospects for an effective green democracy by working with a political model whose essence is authentic communication rather than, say, preference aggregation, representation, or partisan competition. The ecological context means that the kind of communicative democracy that ensues ought to take a particular shape or shapes. This shape depends not on the set of values through reference to which democrats have always justified their projects, though such values have an important place in any contemplation of appropriate political structure. It is, more importantly, a question of some political forms being better able to enter into fruitful engagement with natural systems than others, and so more effectively cope with the ecological challenge.

Why we Need Green Structures, not just Green Values

Inasmuch as there is a conventional wisdom on the matter of ecology and democracy, it would draw a sharp distinction between procedure and substance. As Robert Goodin [1992: 168] puts it, "To advocate democracy is to advocate procedures, to advocate environmentalism is to advocate substantive outcomes". And there can never be any guarantee that

John Dryzek is Professor of Political Science in the Politics Department, University of Melbourne. For helpful comments, the author would like to thank the other participants in the Melbourne Democracy and the Environment Working Group, especially Jöyén Eckersley, Freya Mathews and Val Plumwood; Robert Goodin; David Schlosberg; and audiences at Griffith University's School of Australian Environmental Studies, Australian National University’s Research School of Social Sciences, and the Ecopolitics VII conference.
democratic procedure will produce ecologically benign substance. This distinction between procedure and substance forms the core of Goodin's [1992] treatment of green political theory. To Goodin, the green theory of value represents a coherent set of ends related to the protection and preservation of nature, whereas the green theory of agency addresses where and how these values might be promoted. Goodin argues that a green theory of agency cannot be derived from the green theory of value. Greens may still want to advocate, say, grassroots participatory democracy; but they should recognise that any such advocacy has to be on grounds separate from basic green values. This procedure/substance divide arises most graphically in the context of green advocacy of decentralisation and community self-control. Such decentralisation of political authority would have decidedly anti-ecological substantive consequences in many places with natural-resource-based local economies. Many counties in the Western United States are currently trying to assert their authority against federal environmental legislation (so far with little success in the courts) in order that mining, grazing on federal lands, and forest clearcutting can proceed unchecked. Decentralisation will only work to the extent that local recipients of authority subscribe to ecological values or, alternatively, the degree to which they must stay put and depend for their livelihoods solely on what can be produced locally.

On this kind of account, political structure obviously matters far less than the adoption of green values on the part of denizens in that structure, or the occupancy of key positions (such as membership in parliament) in that structure by greens. Along these lines, Eckersley [1992] concludes that the key to green political transformation is the dissemination and adoption of ecocentric culture. In fairness, she also addresses the issue of political structure, though the kind of structure she advocates is quite close to what already exists in federal liberal democracies. Similarly, to Goodin the key to green politics is participation in electoral politics and coalition with other parties in an effort to ensure that governments in liberal democracies adopt, if only partially and incrementally, those parts of the green political agenda inspired by the green theory of value. As he puts it, 'we can, and probably should, accept green political prescriptions without necessarily adopting green ideas about how to reform political structures and processes' [Goodin, 1992: 5].

The trouble with Goodin's position here is that it regards political agency as essentially unproblematical. In other words, all that has to be done is to convince people in positions of political authority that X should be pursued, and X will be pursued. Goodin's 'X' is in fact a rather large one: he considers (and I agree) that the green programme merits adoption on an all-or-nothing basis. But there are good reasons why dominant political mechanisms cannot adopt and implement that programme, or even substantial chunks of it, irrespective of the degree to which green values are adopted by participants in these mechanisms. For any complex system, be it economic, political, ecological, or social, embodies imperatives or emergent properties that take effect regardless of the intentions of the denizens of the system. Such imperatives constitute values that the system will seek. Other values will be downplayed or ignored.

To begin with the currently dominant order of capital and democracy, all liberal democracies currently operate in the context of a capitalist market system. Any state operating in the context of such a system is greatly constrained in terms of the kinds of policies it can pursue. Policies that damage business profitability – or are even perceived as likely to damage that profitability – are automatically punished by the recoil of the market. Disinvestment here means economic downturn. And such downturn is bad for governments because it both reduces the tax revenue for the schemes those governments want to pursue (such as environmental restoration), and reduces the popularity of the government in the eyes of the voters. This effect is not a matter of conspiracy or direct corporate influence on government; it happens automatically, irrespective of anyone's intentions.

The constraints upon governments here are intensified by the increasing mobility of capital across national boundaries. So, for example, antipollution regulation in the United States stimulates an exodus of polluting industry across the Rio Grande to Mexico's maquiladora sector. Thus irrespective of the ideology of government – and irrespective of the number of green lobbyists, coalition members, or parliamentarians – the first task of any liberal democratic state must always be to secure and maintain profitable conditions for business.

Environmental policy is possible in such states, but only if its damage to business profitability is marginal, or if it can be shown to be good for business. Along these lines, Albert Weale [1992: 66–92] discusses the ideology of 'ecological modernisation', which he believes has gained a toehold in German policy-making. More recently, United States Vice-President Albert Gore has pointed to the degree to which environmental protection can actually enhance business profitability. Yet it remains to be demonstrated that a systemic reconciliation of economic and ecological values is achievable here, as opposed to isolated successes on the part of green capitalists. If green demands are more radical, or 'all or nothing' in Goodin's terms, then 'nothing' remains the likely consequence in any clash with economic imperatives.

Even setting aside the economic context of policy determination under capitalist democracy, there remain reasons why the structure of liberal democracy itself is ultimately incapable of responding effectively to
ecological problems. To cut a long story short, these problems often feature high degrees of complexity and uncertainty, and substantial collective action problems. Thus any adequate political mechanism for dealing with them must incorporate negative feedback (the ability to generate corrective movement when a natural system’s equilibrium is disturbed), coordination across different problems (so that solving a problem in one place does not simply create greater problems elsewhere), coordination across actors (to supply public goods or prevent the tragedy of the commons), robustness (an ability to perform well across different conditions and contexts), flexibility (an ability to adjust internal structure in response to changing conditions), and resilience (an ability to correct for severe disequilibrium, or environmental crisis).1

One can debate the degree to which these criteria are met by different political-economic mechanisms, such as markets, administrative hierarchies, and international negotiations, as well as liberal democracies. My own judgment is that liberal democracy does not perform particularly well across these criteria. Negative feedback under liberal democracy is mostly achieved as a result of particular actors whose interests are aggrieved giving political vent to their annoyance, be it in voting for green candidates, lobbying, contributing money to environmentalist interest groups, or demonstrating. But such feedback devices are typically dominated by the representation of economic interests, businesses and (perhaps) labour. Coordination is often problematic because the currency of liberal democracy consists of tangible rewards to particular interests. Such particular interests do not add up to the general ecological interest. Further, complex problems are generally disaggregated on the basis of these same particular interests, and piecemeal responses crafted in each of the remaining subsets. The ensuing ‘partisan mutual adjustment’, to use Lindblom’s [1965] term, may produce a politically rational resultant. But there is no reason to expect this resultant to be ecologically rational. In other words, interests may be placated in proportion to their material political influence, and compromises may be achieved across them, but wholesale ecological destruction can still result. Resilience in liberal democracy is inhibited by short time horizons (resulting from electoral cycles) and a general addiction to the ‘political solvent’ of economic growth (politics is much happier, and choices easier, when the size of the available financial ‘pie’ is growing).

Despite its inadequacies, I would argue that among the political mechanisms that have been tried by nations from time to time, liberal democracy is the most ecologically rational system [Dryzek, 1987: Ch.9]. But even setting aside the issue of the ecological adequacy of liberal democracy, and its relative merits compared to other systems, the fact remains that the way political systems are structured can make an enormous difference when it comes to the likelihood or otherwise of realising green values. And if this is true, then (to use Goodin’s distinction) we should be able to derive a model of politics from the green theory of value, not just the green theory of agency. Let me now attempt such a derivation.

Biocentric and Anthropocentric Models, and their Inadequacies

What, then, might such a model look like? Would it be democratic? If so, in what sense of democracy? Presumably, what we are looking for is some kind of polity that could embed something more than short-term human material interests, and achieve more sustainable equilibria encompassing natural and human systems. Along these lines, Eckerlsey [1992] uses the term ‘ecocentric’ to describe her preferred kind of system. The term ‘ecocentric’ or ‘biocentric’ implies that intrinsic value is located in nature, and can connote an absence of regard for human interests, essentially shedding one ‘centrism’ in favour of another. But Eckerlsey herself is careful to say that she also wants the variety of human interests in nature to be sheltered under her ecocentric umbrella.

Does it make sense for us to speak in terms of ecocentric or biocentric democracy? In perhaps its most widely-used sense, ‘ecocentric politics’ refers only to a human political system that would give priority to ecological values. To advocate ecocentric politics in such terms is unremarkable, reducing as it does to advocacy of a biocentric ethic – one that accords intrinsic value to natural entities, irrespective of human interest in those entities. Beyond this ethical imperative politics are unchanged, and does not need to stand in any particular structural relation to nature. The problem with such a minimalist approach to ecocentric democracy is that it returns us directly to the position that was rejected in the previous section, where I tried to establish that we need green political structures as well as green values.

What more can ecocentric politics mean, beyond advocacy of biocentric values? A maximalist view here might emphasise the ‘politics’ created by and in nature, to which humans could adjust their politics. Now, Aristotle suggested long ago that what sets humans apart is that man is zoon politikon, the political animal. Primate ethology now suggests that there is something like politics that occurs in animal societies involving, for example, bargaining and trickery in the establishment of dominance hierarchies among males, though even here, one should be wary of anthropomorphising observed behaviour. Yet even if a quasi-politics can be found among primates or other animals, that kind of politics is one in which we humans cannot participate, just as animals cannot participate in our
politics. Moreover, most of what goes on in the natural world (outside animal societies) would still be extremely hard to assimilate to any definition of politics.

The last century or so has seen the ascription of all kinds of political and social models to nature. Social Darwinists saw in nature a reflection of naked capitalism. Marx and Engels saw evolutionary justification for dialectical materialism. In 1915 the US political scientist Henry Jones Ford saw collectivist justification for an organic state. Nazis saw justification for genocide. Microeconomists see something like market transactions in the maximisation of inclusive fitness. Eco-anarchists from Kropotkin to Murray Bookchin see in nature models only of co-operation and mutualism. Roger Masters [1989] has recently suggested that liberal democracy is 'natural' in its flexibility in responding to changing environments. Ecofeminists see caring and nurturing, at least in female nature. And so forth. In short, just about every human political ideology and political-economic system has at one time or another been justified as consistent with nature, especially nature as revealed by Darwinism.

But this sheer variety should suggest that in nature we will find no single blueprint for human politics. And even if we did, that model would only prove ecologically benign to the extent that it could demonstrate that cross-species interactions were universally mutualistic and benign, rather than often hostile and competitive. Following Kropotkin, Murray Bookchin [1982] propounds exactly such a mutualistic, co-operative view of nature, to which he suggests human social, economic, and political life should be assimilated. But Bookchin's position here is, to say the least, selective in its interpretation of nature, and no more persuasive than all the other selective interpretations which have been used to justify all manner of human political arrangements. So a maximalist notion of ecocentric politics of the sort advocated by Bookchin should be rejected.

Yet nature is not devoid of political lessons. What we will find in nature, or at least in our interactions with it, is a variety of levels and kinds of communication to which we might try to adapt. The key here is to downplay 'centrism' of any kind, and focus instead on the kinds of interactions that might occur across the boundaries between humanity and nature. In this spirit, the search for green democracy can indeed involve looking for progressively less anthropocentric political forms. For democracy can exist not only among humans, but also in human dealings with the natural world - though not in that natural world, or in any simple model which nature provides for humanity. So the key here is seeking more egalitarian interchange at the human/natural boundary; an interchange that involves progressively less in the way of human autism. In short, ecological democratisation here is a matter of more effective integration of political

and ecological communication.

On the face of it, this requirement might suggest that the whole history of democratic theory - and democratic practice - should be jettisoned, and that a truly green programme of institutional innovation should be sought under a different rubric than 'democracy'. For democracy, however, contested a concept, and in however many varieties it has appeared in the last two and a half thousand years, is, if nothing else, anthropocentric. One way to substantiate this point would be to go through all the major models of democracy (for example, as presented in Held [1987]), and test them for anthropocentrism. Obviously I have not the space to do that. But let me just note that inasmuch as democratic theory has been taken under the wing of liberalism in the last few hundred years (and most of it has been), then its anthropocentrism has been guaranteed. As Freya Mathews [1991b: 138] notes, 'liberalism as it stands is of course anthropocentric: it takes human interest as the measure of all value'. Liberalism does so because only reasoning entities are accorded political standing. The members of a liberal democracy might, of course, choose to enact positive measures for environmental protection, for example by granting legal rights to natural objects. Guardians for those objects might then make claims on political and legal systems. But any such representation might simply downgrade nature to another set of interests, disaggregating and isolating these interests by assigning them to identifiable natural objects, thus ignoring their intrinsically ecological (interconnected) character.

If we take the major alternative to liberalism, we find that Marxism (and so its associated models of democracy) is equally materialistic and anthropocentric, seeking human liberation in part through more effective domination and control of nature [Eckersley, 1992: 75-95].

The Communicative Rationality of Ecological Democracy

To attempt to move in a different direction here, let me return to the issue of the connection between democracy and reason, as highlighted in Mathew's mention of liberalism. Without wishing to get too involved in the various debates surrounding democracy and rationality [Spragens, 1990; Dryzek, 1990a], let me suggest that the best or most fruitful approach to the issue of how we might rescue rationality and perhaps democracy from anthropocentrism begins with Jürgen Habermas's analysis of the dialectics of rationalisation attendant upon modernity. To Habermas (notably, 1984, 1987), modernisation connotes two kinds of rationalisation. The first is instrumental: instrumental rationality may be defined in terms of the capacity to devise, select, and effect good means to clarified and consistent ends. The second is communicative: communicative action involves
understanding across subjects, the coordination of their actions through discussion, and socialisation. Communicative rationality is the degree to which these processes are uncoerced, undistorted, and engaged by competent individuals. On Habermas’s account, instrumental rationalisation has so far come out ahead, and with it the domination of money and power in political and social life, especially through bureaucracy and capitalism. One can imagine a democracy of instrumental or strategically rational individuals, and this kind of democracy is modelled in great detail by public choice analysis but, as public choice has itself shown, such a democracy is an incoherent mess, producing unstable and arbitrary outcomes [Dryzek, 1992]. Thus some degree of communicative rationality is crucial to any democracy. More important for present purposes, communicative rationality constitutes the model for a democracy that is deliberative rather than strategic in character; or at least one where strategic action is kept firmly in its place.

But could such a democracy be green? Eckersley [1992: 109–17] for one argues that it cannot. And in the terms in which she argues, she is entirely correct. She points out that for Habermas (just as for most liberals) the only entities that matter are ones capable of engaging as subjects in dialogue – in other words, human beings. In a belief carried over from his earlier work on the philosophy of science, Habermas considers that the only fruitful human attitude toward the natural world is one of instrumental manipulation and control. Indeed, the whole point of communicative rationalisation is to prevent human interactions with one another becoming like human interactions with the natural world [Alford, 1985: 77]. Human liberation is bought at the expense of the domination of nature, and so Habermas is as anthropocentric as orthodox Marxists here. And for this reason Eckersley dismisses Habermas as having any possible relevance to the search for a ecocentric politics.

Let me suggest that it would be more appropriate here to try to rescue communicative rationality from Habermas. The key would be to treat communication, and so communicative rationality, as extending to entities that can act as agents, even though they lack the self-awareness that connotes subjectivity. Agency is not the same as subjectivity, and only the former need be sought in nature. Habermas treats nature as though it were brute matter. But nature is not passive, inert, and plastic. Instead, this world is truly alive, and pervaded with meanings.¹

Minimally, a recognition of agency in nature would underwrite respect for natural objects and ecological processes. Just as democrats should condemn humans who would silence other humans, so should they condemn humans who would silence nature by destroying it. But there are implications here for politics, as well as morality. For this recognition of agency in nature means that we should treat signals emanating from the natural world with the same respect we accord signals emanating from human subjects, and as requiring equally careful interpretation. In other words, our relation to the natural world should not be one of instrumental intervention and observation of results oriented to control. Thus communicative interaction with the natural world can and should be an eminently rational affair [Dryzek, 1990b]. Of course, human verbal communication cannot extend into the natural world.¹ But greater continuity is evident in non-verbal communication – body language, facial displays, pheromones, and so forth [Dryzek, 1990b: 207]. And a lot goes on in human conversation beyond the words, which is why a telephone conversation is not the same as a face-to-face meeting. More important than such continuities here are the ecological processes which transcend the boundaries of species, such as the creation, modification, or destruction of niches; or cycles involving oxygen, nitrogen, carbon, and water. Disruptions in such processes occasionally capture our attention, in the form, for example, of climate change, desertification, deforestation, and species extinction.

The idea that there may be agency in nature might seem to fly in the face of several hundred years of Western natural science, social science, and political theory. But perhaps the suggestion is not so far-fetched. Accounts of the actual practice of biological science often emphasise not manipulation and control, but rather understanding and communication. Examples here are especially prominent in work on animal thinking (notably by Donald Griffin), ethology (as in the work of Jane Goodall on chimpanzees), ecology [Worster, 1985], and even genetics (see Keller’s [1983] discussion of the ‘feeling for the organism’ in the work of Barbara McIntock).

Agency in nature on a grand scale is proposed in James Lovelock’s Gaia hypothesis, which suggests that the biosphere as a whole acts so as to maintain the conditions for life. Lovelock does not suggest that Gaia has awareness, and so it cannot be described as a subject (still less a goddess). Rather, Gaia consists of a complex, self-regulating intelligence. But taking the hypothesis to heart ‘implies that the stable state of our planet includes man as a part of, or partner in, a very democratic entity’ [Lovelock, 1979: 145]. Let me suggest that Lovelock’s words here may be taken more literally than perhaps he intends, and that his hypothesis can indeed help us conceptualise a non-anthropocentric democracy.¹

All of these suggestions of agency in nature have their critics, especially among philosophers, probably less frequently among natural scientists. And it may often be hard to prove these positions scientifically. But that may not be the point. No democratic theory has ever been founded on scientific proof of anything, and there is no reason to seek an exception here. When it
comes to the essence of human nature, political theorists can only disagree among themselves. To some, a utility-maximising *homo economicus* captures the essence of human nature; to others (mostly sociologists), it is a plastic, socialised conception of humanity in which there are no choices to be made, let alone utilities to be maximised; to others (such as critical theorists) a communicative and creative self; to others (such as civic republicans) a public-spirited and reflective self. In the present context, the idea of an ecological self [Mathews, 1991a] is perhaps more appropriate than these established paradigms of personhood. My general point here is that when it comes to an ecological democracy that opens itself toward non-human nature, we should not apply standards of proof which no other democratic theory could possibly meet.

I have tried to show that it is conceivable that processes of communicative reason can be extended to cover non-human entities. Communicative reason can underwrite a particular kind of democracy in purely human affairs – one that is discursive or deliberative in character, whose essence is talk and scrutiny of the interests common to a group of people, or of particular interests of some subset of that group. But of course non-human entities cannot talk, and nor should they be anthropomorphised by giving them rights against us or preferences to be incorporated in utilitarian calculation, still less votes. However, as I have suggested, there are senses in which nature can communicate. So what kind of politics or democracy can be at issue here?

**Democracy Without Boundaries**

To approach an answer, we first need to clear away some of the underbrush that has accumulated with the pervasiveness of liberal discourse in the last few centuries. In a liberal conception of democracy, the essence of democracy is preference aggregation [Miller, 1992: 54–5]. Liberals themselves might disagree as to what mechanisms for preference aggregation work best, or whose preferences should be aggregated, or to what extent aggregated preferences should be restrained by other considerations (such as basic human rights). But on one thing they all agree: preferences need to be aggregated, and if so, then a basic task is to define the population (society, or citizenry) whose preferences are to be taken into account. In practice, this can be done very precisely, with electoral registers and so forth. The liberal model of democracy requires a hard-and-fast boundary between the human and non-human world (not to mention a boundary between public and private realms, now challenged by feminists). For non-human entities cannot have preferences that we could easily recognise, or be at all confident in attributing to them. Thus ecological democracy cannot be sought in the image of preference aggregation in liberal democracy.

This liberal ideal of democracy as preference aggregation also presupposes the notion of a self-contained, self-governing community. But in today's world, that notion is becoming increasingly fictional, as political, social, and especially economic transactions transcend national boundaries. In which case, it might be productive to start thinking about models of democracy in which the boundaries of communities are indeterminate. Burnheim’s proposals for demarchy can be interpreted as interesting moves in this direction. To Burnheim [1985], democracy and democratic legitimacy are not to be sought in geographically-bounded entities like nation states, but rather in functional authorities of varying geographical scope, run by individuals selected by lot from among those with a material interest in the issue in question. Now, Burnheim’s functional authorities arguably establish different boundaries: between functional issue areas, rather than geographical territories. But the trouble here is that there are of course major interactions across issue areas. So interactions across issue areas, no less than interactions across state boundaries, force us to look for the essence of democracy not in the mechanical aggregation of the preferences of a well-defined and well-bounded group of people (such as a nation-state, or set of persons with a material interest in an issue), but rather in the content and style of interactions. Some styles may be judged antidemocratic (for example, the imposition of a decision without possibility for debate or criticism), some relatively democratic (for example, wide dissemination of information about an issue, the holding of hearings open to any interested parties, and so on).

A focus on the style and content of interactions fits well with the communicative rationality grounding for democracy to which I have already alluded. Now, some critics of deliberative democracy and its grounding in communicative rationality argue that it privileges rational argument, and effectively excludes other kinds of voices. But the solution to any such exclusion is obvious: the deliberative model should be extended so as to make provision for such alternative voices. A similar extension may be in order to accommodate non-human communication.

Along with a recognition of the indefinite nature of boundaries of the political community, such extension means that we are now well-placed (or at least better-placed than liberal democrats) to think about dismantling what is perhaps the biggest political boundary of them all: that between the human and the non-human world. This is indeed a big step, and no doubt some people would still believe that it takes us out of the realm of politics and democracy altogether, at least as those terms are conventionally defined. Yet there is a sense in which human relationships with nature are
already political. As Val Plumwood points out in her contribution to this collection, politicisation is a concomitant of the human colonization of nature. Such colonisation connotes an authoritarian politics; democratization would imply a more egalitarian politics here.

Democracy is, if nothing else, both an open-ended project and an essentially contested concept; indeed, if debates about the meaning of democracy did not occur in a society, we would hesitate to describe that society as truly democratic. All I am trying to do here is introduce another major dimension of contestation.

At one level, it is possible to propose ecological democracy as a regulative ideal. This is, after all, how the basic principles of both liberal and deliberative democracy can be advanced [Miller, 1992: 55-6]. For liberals, the regulative ideal is fairness and efficiency in preference aggregation: the various institutional forms under which preference aggregation might proceed are then a matter for investigation, comparison, and debate. Similarly, for deliberative democrats, the regulative ideal is free discourse about issues and interests; again, various institutional forms might then be scrutinised in the light of this ideal. For ecological democrats, the regulative ideal is effectiveness in communication that transcends the boundary of the human world. As it enters human systems, then obviously ecological communication needs to be interpreted. However, unlike the situation in liberal democracy (or for that matter in Burnheim’s demarchy), this communication does not have to be mediated by the material interests of particular actors.

The content of such communication might involve attention to feedback signals emanating from natural systems; in which case, the practical challenge when it comes to institutional design becomes one of dismantling barriers to such communication. With this principle in mind, it is a straightforward matter to criticise institutions that try to subordinate nature on a large scale. Think, for example, of the development projects sponsored by the World Bank, which until recently did not even pretend to take local environmental factors into account (now they at least pretend to). Yet it is also possible to criticise approaches to our dealings with the environment that do exactly the reverse, and seek only the removal of human agency. On one of his own interpretations, Lovelock’s Gaia can do quite well without people. And a misanthrope such as David Ehrenfeld [1978] would prefer to rely on natural processes left well alone by humans.

With this regulative ideal of ecological democracy in mind we are, then, in a position both to criticise existing political-economic arrangements and to think about what might work better. I am not going to offer a blueprint for the institutions of such a democracy. The design of such a democracy should itself be discursive, democratic, and sensitive to ecological signals.

Moreover, idealist political prescription insensitive to real-world constraints and possibilities for innovation is often of limited value. And variation in the social and natural contexts within which political systems operate means that we should be open to institutional experimentation and variety across these contexts (though, as I noted earlier, an ability to operate in different contexts may itself be a highly desirable quality for any political-economic mechanism).

When it comes to criticism of existing political (and economic) mechanisms, it is reasonably easy to use the ecological communicative ideal to expose some gross failings. Perhaps most obviously, to the degree that any such mechanism allows internal communication to dominate and distort signals from the outside, it merits condemnation. So, for example, a bureaucracy with a well-developed internal culture may prove highly inattentive to its environment. And bureaucratic hierarchy pretty much ensures distortion and loss of information across the levels of hierarchy. Indeed, these are standard criticisms of bureaucracy as a problem-solving device, though such criticisms are usually couched in terms of a human environment, not a natural one. Markets can be just as autist, if in different ways. Obviously, they respond only to human, consumer preferences that can be couched in monetary terms. Any market actor trying to take nonpecuniary factors into account is going to have its profitability, and so survival chances, damaged (this is not to gainsay the possibility of green consumerism). Conversely, the positive feedback of business growth (and the growth of the capitalist market in general) is guided by processes entirely internal to markets.

Above all, existing mechanisms merit condemnation to the extent that their size and scope do not match the size and scope of ecosystems and/or ecological problems. Under such circumstances, communications from or about particular ecological problems or disequilibria will be swamped by communications from other parts of the world. Here, markets that transcend ecological boundaries, which they increasingly do, merit special condemnation. The internationalisation and globalisation of markets make it that much easier to engage in local despoliation. It may be quite obvious that a local ecosystem is being degraded and destroyed, but ‘international competitiveness’ is a good stick with which to beat environmental critics of an operation. For example, they can be told that old growth forests must be clearcut, rather than logged selectively. Obviously, some ecological problems are global, as are some markets. This does not of course mean that effective response mechanisms to global ecological problems can be found in global markets. Market autism guarantees that they cannot.

Turning to the desirable scope and shape of institutions suggested by the ideal of ecological democracy, the watchword here is ‘appropriate scale’. In
other words, the size and scope of institutions should match the size and scope of problems. There may be good reasons for the predispositions toward small scale in ecoanarchism and 'small is beautiful' green political thought. Most notably, feedback processes in natural systems are diffuse and internal [Patton and Odum, 1981], and do not pass through any central control point. Highly centralised human collective choice mechanisms are not well-placed to attend to such diffuse feedback. Moreover, the autonomy and self-sufficiency advocated by green decentralists can force improved perception of the natural world. To the degree that a community must rely on local ecological resources, it will have to take care of them. It does not follow that local self-reliance should be taken to an extreme of autarky. Rather, it is a matter of degree: the more the community is politically and economically self-reliant, then the more it must take care of its local ecosystems. Presumably the degree of self-reliance necessary to secure adequate care here depends on a great deal on the level of environmental consciousness in the community in question. To the extent that environmental consciousness is lacking, then economic consciousness has to do all the work, so there are many places (such as resource-dependent local economies in the American West) where only autarky would do the trick.

But obviously not all ecological problems and feedback signals reside at the local level. Some of them are global, and hence demand global institutional response. There is no need in this scheme of things to privilege the nation-state, and every reason not to; few, if any, ecological problems coincide with state boundaries. There is only slightly greater reason to privilege bioregions. Bioregions are notoriously hard to define, and again many problems transcend their boundaries. For example, an airshed will not necessarily correspond with a watershed, and a single watershed may contain several radically different types of ecosystems. (I lived in the Columbia river basin, which contains both mid-continent deserts and coastal forests.)

Coordination through Spontaneous Order

An ecological democracy would, then, contain numerous and cross-cutting loci of political authority. The obvious question here is: how does one coordinate them, given that one cannot (for example) resolve air pollution problems while completely ignoring the issue of water pollution, or deal with local sulphur dioxide pollution while ignoring the long-distance diffusion of sulphur dioxide in acid rain? The way this coordination is currently accomplished is by privileging one level of political organisation. In unitary political systems, this will normally be the national state, though matters can be a bit more complicated in federal systems. The state (national or sub-national) will of course often contain an anti-pollution agency which (nominally, if rarely in practice) coordinates policy in regard to different kinds of pollutants. But, as I have already noted, this is an entirely artificial solution, and no more defensible than privileging the local community, or for that matter the global community.

The main conceivable alternative to privileging the state is to rely on the emergence of some spontaneous order that would somehow coordinate the actions of large numbers of bodies. One example of such an order is the market, especially as celebrated by von Hayek [Goodin, 1992: 154]. But markets, as noted, are not exactly an ecological success story. Nor are they much good at coordinating the activities of political authorities. Within decentralised political systems, coordination is achieved largely through the spontaneous order of partisan mutual adjustment, which to Lindblom [1965] is at the core of collective decision in liberal democracies. Such regimes may contain more formal and consciously-designed constitutions, but partisan mutual adjustment proceeds regardless of the content of such formalisms. This adjustment involves a complex mix of talk, strategy, commitment, and individual action devised in response to the context created by the actions of others. As I noted earlier, this kind of spontaneous order under liberal democracy leaves much to be desired when scrutinised in an ecological light.

Ecosystems, including the global ecosystem, are also examples of spontaneous order, so one might try to devise an imitation which included humans. Along these lines, Murray Bookchin [1982] attempts to develop a naturalistic justification for human political organisation. His eco-anarchist prescriptions might make some sense at the local level. But he can develop no naturalistic justification for the kinds of political order that would be needed to transcend localities, beyond relying on the spontaneous generation of structures whose specification is completely indeterminate (which is really no answer at all).

Let me suggest that there is a kind of spontaneous order which might perform the requisite coordinating functions quite well. Discussions in democratic theory are normally directed toward how the state, or state-analogues such as local governments and intergovernmental authorities, shall be constructed. What this focus misses is the possibility of democratisation apart from and against established authority [Dryzek, 1996]. This latter kind of democratisation is associated with the idea of a public sphere or civil society. Public spheres are political bodies that do not exist as part of formal political authority, but rather in confrontation with that authority. Normally, they find their identity in confrontation with the state (think, for example, of Solidarity in Poland in the early 1980s), though
authority constituted at levels both higher and lower than the state can also be the object of their ire. Resistance here is often ‘local’ in the sense of being issue-specific. Such local resistance is celebrated by Michel Foucault, though he would not be interested in the constructive role for public spheres intimated here. The internal politics of public spheres is usually defined by relatively egalitarian debate, and consensual modes of decision making. Contemporary examples are afforded by new social movements, especially on behalf of feminism, ecology, and peace. Indeed, the green movement may be conceptualised in these terms—at least the parts of that movement that do not seek entry into the state through electoral politics.

Such public spheres fit well with communicative and deliberative models of democracy. But what do they have to do with coordination across geographical jurisdictions or functional issue area boundaries? The answer is that scope in these terms is unbounded and variable, possibly responding to the scope of the issue in question. To take a simple example, the environmental movement is now international, and organisations such as Greenpeace or Friends of the Earth International can bring home to particular governments the international dimension of issues, such as the consequences to Third World countries of toxic wastes exported by industrialised countries. Along these lines, Goodin [1992: 176–7] notes that green parties can assist in the ‘coordination of international environmental policies’, though as a green ‘Realo’ he appears to have only conventional party political participation in state politics in mind, rather than public spheres. To take another example, international public spheres constituted by indigenous peoples and their advocates can bring home to boycotters of furs in London or Paris the resulting economic devastation such boycotts imply for indigenous communities in the Arctic, which rely for cash income on trapping. A public sphere on a fairly grand scale was constituted by the unofficial Global Forum which proceeded in parallel with the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio in 1992. The point is that the reach of public spheres is entirely variable and not limited by formal boundaries on jurisdictions, or obsolete notions of national sovereignty. And they can come into existence, grow, and die along with the importance of particular issues. So, for example, it is entirely appropriate that the West European peace movement declined as cold war tensions eased in the 1980s.

**Conclusion**

In contemplating the kinds of communication that might ensure more harmonious coordination across political and ecological systems, there is an ever-present danger of lapsing into ungrounded idealism and wishful

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**NOTES**

1. Greater detail on these requirements may be found in Dryzek [1987].
2. Curiously enough, fascism may do better than either liberalism or Marxism in the anti-anthropocentrism stakes; as Anna Bramwell [1989: 195–208] notes, the first green ‘party’ in Europe was actually a strand in Hitler’s Nazi Party. But fascism obviously takes us quite a long way from democracy, and the arguments of eco-authoritarians such as Robert Heilbroner and Garrett Hardin have been too thoroughly discredited to warrant any attention here.
3. This point should not be confused with the green spirituality advocated by deep ecologists, goddess worshippers, and others who see divinity in nature: the choice here is not between an inert nature on the one hand and a nature populated by wood nymphs, sprites, and goddesses on the other. Nor does a recognition of agency in the natural world imply that its entities should be treated like human subjects.
4. Prince Charles may talk to his rhododendrons, but they do not talk back.
5. The Gaia hypothesis bears some resemblance to superorganism and teleological treatments of ecosystem development, which have long been abandoned by most academic ecologists (except Eugene Odum), who are committed to more reductionist and stochastic models. But the superorganismic view lives on in the pages of _The Ecologist_.
6. Iris Marion Young points to the equal validity of speaking, rhetoric, and storytelling.

**REFERENCES**


Towards a Green World Order: Environment and World Politics

JANNA THOMPSON

Global environmental problems need a political solution. One of the most difficult problems for environmental political theory is to determine what this solution would be. There are two basic conditions that any proposed 'world order' must satisfy: it must ensure that individuals and communities comply with environmental prescriptions, and that decision-making is flexible enough to cope with environmental problems in all their complexity. Common conceptions of a world political order, centrist and anarchist, are not likely to satisfy these conditions. It must be considered also what developments in world society are most likely to bring about a world order capable of solving environmental and related problems.

Environmental problems are transnational problems. In some cases, the effects themselves reach beyond borders. But even problems that seem to be merely local, such as photochemical smog, or polluted lakes and rivers, are the result of a world-wide development of production and markets, the by-products of a struggle for economic prosperity or survival. The attempts of people within their neighbourhoods or national borders to solve environmental problems are likely to have limited success, for either the solution will be beyond their political means or their efforts will be thwarted by 'economic necessities'. The attempt of one country to live within environmental limitations, to impose strict environmental measures, to put a ceiling on production and consumption, will not have its desired effect unless other countries do the same. And if this seems unlikely then there will be little popular support for measures that are bound to be disadvantageous for those who adopt them.

Environmental problems are bound up with other global problems. It seems unlikely that environmental problems can be solved without also doing something about the problem of world poverty and under-development, for people who are caught up in the struggle for mere survival are not able to make sacrifices to save their environment. Nor are they likely

Janna Thompson teaches in the School of Philosophy, La Trobe University, Australia.