



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

Boekbespreking van: Democracy and Green Political Thought

Heijden, H.A. van der

Citation

Heijden, H. A. van der. (1997). Boekbespreking van: Democracy and Green Political Thought. *Acta Politica*, 32: 1997(2), 210-213. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3450503>

Version: Publisher's Version

License: [Leiden University Non-exclusive license](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3450503>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Book Reviews

B. Doherty and M. de Geus (eds.), *Democracy and green political thought: sustainability, rights and citizenship*. Routledge, London 1996

Among the essential features of the new social movements of the 1970s and 1980s was their dissatisfaction with, and their resistance to existing Western democratic institutions and practices. "Their legal order is not our one," was the slogan of the squatters' and autonomous movements, and they started desperate fights with the police. "The personal is political," was the claim of large groups within the women's movement, and they retired to their conversation groups, or started their long march through the institutions. "The future of the planet is at stake," asserted many in the environmental movement, and they founded green parties to resist the danger, or they wrote books on the relationship between saving the planet and democracy.

But whose planet should actually be saved, and in which way? Here an important controversy emerged, derived from the all-pervading distinction between, on the one hand, environmental or shallow green political thinking, and, on the other hand, ecologist or deep green thinking.

The shallow current is the least disturbing one. Starting from a firm anthropocentric point of view – man is the centre of the universe and the master of nature – environmental problems are considered to be serious, and indeed in the long run they threaten the survival of mankind. However, by means of "ecological modernization", and largely within the parameters of liberal-democratic political institutions – extended to the African and Asian parts of the world – the future of mankind is guaranteed.

The deep green or ecological current is less optimistic. It is hesitantly acknowledged that ecological modernization, as exemplified in the Brundtland-report and in the 1992 UNCED summit in Rio, is more than mere window dressing. Yet, it is not enough by far. Thousands of species are threatened with extinction; tropical rain forests disappear; global warming and desertification threaten the lives of millions of people and endanger world food production. Whereas in environmental or shallow green political thinking the current system of parliamentary democracy is largely taken for granted, it is a hot topic of debate within the ecological or deep green wing of the environmental movement.

The discussion centres around three broad questions: (1) Can green political thought provide a distinctive contribution to the theory and practice of democracy?

Book Reviews

(2) If so, in which way are democracy and ecology linked? (3) What would a green democracy be like?

In *Democracy and green political thought* these three questions are assessed to a large degree. The eleven chapters are loosely grouped under three labels: the discourse of green movements; green politics and democratic theory; the institutions of a green democracy. This labeling is not very helpful: the three chapters in the first part, for instance, do not reflect the discourse of green movements at all, but are essays on the relationship between green politics and democratic theory (e.g. the chapter on green politics and communitarism) or on green democratic institutions (the chapter on worker cooperatives). The division between the second and the third part of the book is also rather arbitrary.

The question whether green political thought could provide a distinctive contribution to the theory and practice of democracy is most fundamentally dealt with in the chapters written by Michael Saward and Robyn Eckersley. Saward's starting point is epistemological: democracy is justified as the best means to take account of the essential fallibility of human knowledge. However, in the 1970s doomsday authors like Ophuls and Heilbrunner argued that the ecological crisis could be tackled only by a strong government that would be prepared to curb the freedom of individual citizens in order to prevent ecological degradation. Also today, some parts of the green movement deal with democracy in a highly instrumental way. According to Saward, this leaves them open to the danger that their arguments will produce authoritarian solutions. Saward's conclusion is that ecological and democratic goals should be strictly distinguished.

This conclusion is attacked by Eckersley; in her view utilitarian theories like Saward's are greatly inadequate. We cannot develop a theory of democracy without enlisting a theory of autonomy and justice, and a theory of democracy should therefore necessarily be a rights-based theory. Eckersley is writing from an Australian background, a political culture in which the concept of rights has always played a central role. She defends the position that an environmental rights discourse could provide a fourth generation of human rights (after the civil, political and social rights), that might also serve to recontextualize and qualify existing human rights. So, according to Eckersley, the main disagreement between greens and liberals does not refer to the meaning and form of democracy but rather to the meaning and scope of autonomy and justice. Whereas the liberal principles of autonomy and justice respect the rights of each and every individual to determine their own affairs, from a green point of view individual autonomy should be compatible with social and ecological well-being. Rights would belong to individuals not only as individuals, but also as members of social and ecological communities. In addition to this, Peter Christoff in his chapter on ecologically-grounded democracy introduces the concept of "ecological citizenship", by means of which "universal" principles relating to environmental rights are incorporated in law, culture and politics.

The issue of the greens' commitment to participatory democracy is part of both the first and the second questions in the debate on green democracy mentioned above.

This commitment largely depends on, and is connected with the ideas and experiences of other new social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, among which the democratization movement. Hence, one might wonder whether there is anything specifically ecological about the green view on democracy. After all, as the editors state, the most consistent meaning of democracy has always been "rule by the people". However, it is exactly this seemingly obvious definition that is attacked by the greens. In whatever way "the people" is defined, it does not include non-human species or the natural world, and so two challenges to the dominant definition emerge.

First of all, the nature of ecological problems suggests the need to consider a re-definition of the form of the democratic and moral community. If the answer to the question, "are human beings part of nature?", is yes, and if, moreover, the boundaries between humanity and the natural world are blurred and uncertain, it is harder to be categorical about restricting democracy to "rule by the people". As Mike Mills, writing from a biocentric perspective, argues: if nature could be represented in certain forms (even by humans acting on its behalf) this would mean that the moral community and the political community would become more congruent.

A second challenge to the current definition of democracy refers to the need to stretch its dimensions of time and place. Concerning the dimension of place: many contemporary environmental problems are global problems (destruction of the ozone layer, greenhouse effect) and so the impact of pollution may affect those living well beyond the place where it was created. As Doherty and de Geus argue, this inevitably leads to the issue of democratization at a transnational level. However, one might wonder whether this exclusively applies to ecological issues. After all, globalization is one of the essential features of many contemporary political issues.

The stretching of the time-dimension seems to apply more specifically to a green conceptualization of democracy. The impact of pollution inevitably challenges one to think about how obligations to future generations might be related to democracy. Saurin, for instance, has argued that pollution could be conceived as one of the "routine consequences of modernity". Increasingly we produce what we do not consume ourselves, and we consume what we do not produce ourselves. Distancing the site of production from the site of consumption also implies distancing the site of pollution from its original cause. Hence, the allocation of responsibility for this pollution is confused. To take the consequences of our decisions for future generations into account, our democratic decision-making procedures should be fundamentally adapted to our obligations to these generations.

The third broad question in the debate on green democracy referred to what a green democracy would be like. In the early years, green parties and radical green movements used to stress the need for participatory democracy. Only by challenging material inequalities and bureaucratic hierarchies, the argument ran, would a new communitarism emerge that would be powerful enough to overcome the atomized self-interest of individual consumers. In the 1990s however, the emphasis has shifted gradually from participatory democracy to ecological citizenship and associational democracy.

Whereas, according to Achterberg, existing forms of liberal democracy lack strong forms of associational life, associational democracy provides a better basis for sustainability as it entails the institutional form most likely to build global and intergenerational solidarity.

Opinions widely diverge with respect to the concrete form of associative democracy. According to Michael Kenny, the central concept of this form of democracy is "community", but in green circles at least three different interpretations are routinely confused: a nostalgic historical reading of community as a principle which underpinned social relations in the past; a sociological assertion that the bonds of community are under threat from the market; and a normative view that the ethics of community ought to determine the political and economic shape of contemporary society.

As Kenny observes, the problems associated with ecological communitarism echo some of the central themes of the so-called liberal-communitarism debate, and the works of some of the leading communitarian theorists – McIntyre, Sandel, Taylor, Walzer – contain many useful ideas about the nature and demands of community ties and identities.

By connecting different bodies of thought like this *Democracy and green political thought* presents a stimulating contribution to the discussion on the future of Western democracy, even though it does not offer any practical solutions.

Hein-Anton van der Heijden

M. de Geus, *Ecologische Utopieën: Ecotopia's en het milieudebat* (Ecological utopias: ecotopias and the environmental debate). Jan van Arkel, Utrecht 1996

In its early days, green political thought was as radical as green parties were inflexible. The theorists of the movement tried to develop either an ecosocialist ideology or one that was "neither right nor left" but went beyond Western industrialism and materialism. Green activists and politicians were less interested in taking political responsibility than in witnessing to the Green truth, raising eco-consciousness and mobilizing the masses. The introduction of the notion of sustainability changed all that: greens and non-greens developed a common language, recognized a shared interest in a *modus vivendi*, and defused the green bomb. In green political theory, the term "sustainable" has replaced the now unfashionable and even slightly suspect "green". On the research agenda, the introduction into green thought of elements of economic and political liberalism and democracy gained priority over deep-green interests. In environmental politics, all but the most radical activists have joined the powers that be in a dialogue about politically and economically feasible piece-meal strategies aimed at reducing the extent of environmental problems. The precise goals no longer seem worth bickering