

From Morality to Action and Back — Reflections on the Lesvos Conference

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Environmentalism, with borderlines stretching from abstract 'nature' to tangible, material surroundings, is bound to occupy with equal force a wide variety of disciplines concerned with cognitive, behavioural, and social life. Its wide scope raises the question of whether Environmentalism constitutes a nominalist umbrella, bringing together various 'environmentalisms' only circumstantially, or whether there are patterns that analytically link subjects such as images of nature; the relationship between perception and treatment of the physical environment; political structures and economic appropriation; social movements and environmental policies; science and technology; and morality and power. The international conference 'Nature, Science, and Social Movements'² that took place in Lesvos in June of 2004, was informed by such issues as it brought together philosophers, sociologists, anthropologists, ethnologists, economists, and physical scientists in an effort to identify not just current trends in environmentalism, but cross-disciplinary patterns as well. The quest for those patterns was facilitated by the wide range of presented topics and issues that led to lively debates that caught the attention of the participants, leading to unique discussions.

As the event was unfolding, it became apparent that there was barely any time to reflect communally on the central issues raised at the conference. This took place later, after the participants had happily departed and the dust had settled down. Since Linda Kalof generously offered to devote a special issue of *Human Ecology Review* to the conference, I now have the opportunity, as the key organiser of the event, to reflect on the conference as a whole. Needless to say, this endeavour entails some responsibility as the thoughts exposed below must hold some resonance to the rest of the participants as well. I can only hope that I do justice to the high quality of my colleagues' research efforts and presentations.

To address the original question, whether it is more productive to speak of one comprehensive, or many specific 'environmentalisms,' most of the presentations suggested that at the heart of environmental issues we find not science, but *zweckrationalitaet*, morality and values. Science is a limited enterprise, checked by ecological complexity and human

imagination. Whether we accept nature as 'benign,' 'ephemeral,' 'tolerant,' or 'capricious,' depends more on our moral presumptions, and less on value-free scientific experiments. And our presumptions about 'nature' are linked, not only with particular modes of environmental action, treatment, and conduct, but, implicitly or explicitly, with moral images of society. Science defends its autonomy from philosophy and political ideologies by insisting that it is value-free, even morally blind for the sake of objectivity. This is a contested, highly dubious claim: mere perception alone of all types and kinds of patterns we could 'discover' by just observing the surroundings would bewilder us. Instead, as was indicated more than once during the event, good science ought to state explicitly its social targets and inspirations without abandoning scientific objectivity, but rather asking 'how could I use knowledge about nature to promote a social program?'

Areti Kontogianni, Ioannis Tziritis, and Michalis Skourtos demonstrate how an 'ecology as a social program' approach could be applied in their study of social attitudes, economic exploitation, and ecological conditions of the Axios river basin in Northern Greece. Taking into account the wider international environment, the national Greek environmental policy for the region, as well as the conflicting attitudes and interests of local stakeholders, they ask the question: 'What can scientific method offer to the resolution of such conflicts, especially at local scales and within ecosystem entities that mediate multiple functions?' The suggested answer is to help society make informed decisions in using space and resources. The study demonstrates that social conflicts over the environment can be analyzed, but they are useful only when set in the context of social, economic and environmental pressures and the responses of different stakeholder groups to these pressures.

Exploring the domain of stakeholders, Adrianna Semmens raises issues concerning the substance of deliberative democracy, and in particular, ways to accommodate, adequately and fairly, all those participating in the process of decision-making. Addressing the issue of women with 'environmental protection problems,' she argues that Habermasian

deliberative democracy in not as democratic, open, and unbiased as male advocates would like to think. Adopting a feminist perspective, she argues that women's cultural, experiential, and structural standing differentiates them from male formal objectivity (confrontation, argumentation, debate, prevalence of one argument over another) in terms of communicative skills, competency, and procedural rules.

Direct democracy and environmentalism are also addressed by Adrian Smith, but this time in connection to technological models that fit small-scale egalitarian communities. The issue he addresses is whether technology has any autonomy vis-à-vis social structures beyond the social movement that produces it. His conclusion, informed by the history of Alternative Technology in England, is negative: Over-specialized technology produced in the 70s to match the utopian ethos of radical environmentalists proved incompatible with the values and targets of industrial, mainstream England, and thus were ignored to oblivion. The point is clear: The driving forces of history are social values and aspirations, and not technological innovation per se.

The issue of environmental values and the ways they are incorporated into mainstream politics is also the subject of Iñaki Barcena's "European Governance and Green Social Movements: Transport and GMO's policies in Spain." He examines the efforts of the environmental movement in Spain to promote sustainable development policies. Compared to the alternative technology (AT) movement in England, the Spanish case constitutes a rather successful way for an anti-systemic movement to move from the periphery to the centre of power by taking into account what the AT movement could not: The values, targets, and programs of mainstream politics, both on the national and the international, European level. This 'compromise' took place by allying with a wider conglomeration of opposition to central government's policies. Yet again, the political structures that characterize each political arena (local, national, and European) are not equally susceptible to environmentalism, since closure becomes more pronounced as we move from local to European arenas. Differential susceptibility indicates that values alone cannot account for attitudes toward the environment. Instead, political structures have a relative level of autonomy in imposing their own centralized and conservative rules to efforts of change.

In a similar case of 'industrialization vs. the people,' John Karamichas examines the controversy around the construction of a high voltage power station in the metropolitan area of Athens to meet the demands of the 2004 Olympics. Here we are faced not with an environmental movement seeking allies to promote alternative technologies and communal values, but of NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard) residents who formed a wide but apparently thin web of alliances to protect their area from becoming the site of the new industrial unit.

While their resistance stretched from local initiatives, legal actions, and supporters in the parliament, their campaign was finally defeated both legally and morally. This was due to the fact that the Greek public distanced itself from their cause valuing the success of the Olympic Games over the health of the residents of one particular area.

Yet, power as morality *and* science is most clearly presented in Italo Pardo and Giuliana Prato's article on the fox-hunting debate in Britain that has steered emotions as no other issue has managed in the recent history of the country. It is an outstanding case of contrasting social milieus, localities, arguments, media coverage, and power differentials that manifest in a debate about the current state of affairs in the years of late-modernity. On the one side, we meet the macrocosmos of the countryside; on the other, the urban world of politics, media, and subjective sensitivities. And while the authors painstakingly unfold, in front of our eyes, the long and winding history of the debate, and analyse and weigh the various factors that have contributed to the demise of fox-hunting in the UK, they leave no doubt in our mind that at the end of the day, when all the arguments have been exposed, it is not reason, but the tyranny of the majority that imposes its will on the countryside minority.

But let us be cautious. As Pardo and Prato indicate, the powers of the majority are not boundless — they need legitimation, and legitimation is best served when it is carried on the shoulders of popular morality. We can fully appreciate this as we move to Bob Bolin's, Sara Grineski's and Timothy Collins' study of environmental racism in Phoenix, Arizona, which demonstrates the significance of social values in either justifying or reinforcing the legitimacy of such conditions. As the authors suggest, environmental segregation of African Americans and Latinos in the southern districts of the city are historically linked to factors such as racial exclusion, class domination, political disenfranchisement, and a racialized economy. The significance of pointing out the environmental consequences of racial discrimination is not so much in matters of inequality as such, but of environmental degradation reinforcing notions of moral superiority of the White majority over the rest of the residents. The degraded conditions the Phoenix minorities inhabit operate both as constantly reminding them of their inferior status, as well as restricting their choices for a better life.

Martha Henderson, Kostas Kalampokidis, Emmanuel Marmaras, Pavlos Konstantinidis, and Manussos Marangudakis, in a rather interdisciplinary study, suggest that political structures do not only affect the decision-making, but the substance of scientific proposals as well. Political structures deeply affect scientific programs and findings even when all the other factors that shape environmental policies are similar (scientific culture, access to data and other resources, ad-

ministrative capacity, economic development, etc). A comparative study of US and Greek fire prevention policies reveals a somewhat surprising result: The US has adopted a 'prescribed burning' policy; while Greece has adopted, the more traditional, all out prevention of wilderness fires. This is to be understood in terms of different policy principles and ecology perspectives in the US and the EU as political units: While US scientists and policymakers are in control of a vast and complex ecosystem, their European counterparts are faced with 'national' ecologies which are not just smaller, but compartmentalized (ecologically speaking) as well. As European policies are primarily political, and not ecological, they are characterized by a democratic 'commonality,' that is, each country follows similar policies on similar issues. In such a context, 'hard' management is clearly preferable to 'soft' management, because it is able to recognize different responses to different parts of a wider, Euro-Asiatic, or Euro-African ecology.

I left Thanasis Kizos and Maria Koulouri's paper on the multiple transformations of the island of Lesbos, the island that hosted our conference, for last to remind us that our natural environment is flexible and adaptable to social change, but also is a reservoir of symbols and identity, connecting a population with its not so distant past. The yearning of the inhabitants of the island for those times that today are considered remnants and monuments of a 'golden, wealthy and traditional age' when not only landscapes but also society in general was 'better' than today, brings us back to the beginning of the introduction and the argument that at the heart of environmentalism lies morality.

In all of the above cases, the predominance of morality is visible in that aspiration comes before observation, and prescriptive action guides environmental contact. This should not surprise us. As Kant noted, and the Gestalt psychologists later demonstrated, understanding and acting upon the world is impossible by sense perception alone. Human communication and action depend on shared *meaning*, and control over meaning creates a set of acceptable and unacceptable rules of social action and order. Thus, in respect to social action, 'nature' reflects authoritative patterns of normative standards and patterns of social interaction. In the process of defining social reality, nature provides us with tools used for symbolic communication as well as the cognitive means to interfere with the physical environment for the acquisition of wealth, status, and power.

The higher the order of meaning, the more powerful our ability to control and shape social and environmental contact becomes. Thus, while in all relevant cases that were presented at the conference we can detect an unquestionable commonsense notion of what constitutes a clean and healthy natural environment, this by itself is not a sufficient factor to

guide environmental action. Instead, commonsense remains 'vernacular,' preoccupied with the immediate and the tangible. As Kontogianni et al. demonstrate in the case of the Axios river basin, immediacy with the ecosystem does not guarantee comprehensive environmental action. Anything above and beyond the immediate and the 'taken for granted' requires elaborated and reflective cognitive schemes, plans, and precise definitions of what constitutes human well-being; in short, it requires a 'manifesto' with strong moral undertones. Pro-active social statements that upset commonsense and mediate between 'social action' and 'environmental contact,' between symbolism and economic appropriation of natural resources are the constructions of the social class of intellectuals, social mediators and scientific interpreters. Scientists, theologians, moralists, philosophers, poets, activists, and even bureaucrats are specialised in constructing normative propositions as well as blueprints for social action. Ability to formulate a thesis on nature entails a privileged position as it justifies or discredits particular social settings on the basis of being in harmony or disharmony with the 'nature of things.' Obviously, in modern societies characterised by competing values and interests, intellectuals could not form a uniform front, or act in isolation. Rather, they ally themselves with other social classes and groups to control vital moral, political, and material resources as the British (Pardo and Prato), Spanish (Inaki Barcena), the Greek (Karamichas) and the English cases (Smith) demonstrate.

The above statements might give the impression that the fate of nature's discourse is an arbitrary enterprise, open to all kinds of possibilities, restricted only by our ability to weld social alliances. This impression could be reinforced by the fact that nature is an idea, and as such, construction of meaning and action onto nature is an arbitrary social mechanism. Yet, this 'idealistic' concession is checked by two Weberian prepositional arguments. First, based on the 'elective affinity' between one's social situation and the belief one holds, it follows that there should be a similarity of perception of what constitutes 'nature' within similar social organizations and social settings with similar structures. As the case of Greek and American wildlife fire policy suggests (Henderson et al.) if any of these crucial components are different, then it is quite likely that conceptions of nature and of environmental contact will also differ. Second, economic activities, and in general 'environmental contact,' retains a certain autonomy as the domain of acquiring material wealth and scientific knowledge. If new images of society and nature fail to address, or ignore the dominant social structures, then they might remain academic exercises. Thus, as Smith and Karamichas warn us, new social movements, notwithstanding their rationality and sensitivity, will fail if they ignore the material interests of the majority. Deliberative, or direct democ-

racy, as presented by Semmens, notwithstanding its merits, faces the danger of remaining an academic exercise to the extent that ignores the social instability that idiosyncratic participation in politics might bring. This is to say that no matter how moral or rational a suggestion might be, it will be resisted, if not rejected, if it threatens the material standards of the day. In each and every period of our history, material resources might be limited by knowledge, tools, and customs, but means of increasing wealth are rarely rejected when available. Adam Smith might have exaggerated when he assumed that social evolution is driven by mere materialist ambition, but he was correct to point out the almost universal desire for prosperity. And as many contributors suggested, voices that wish to challenge dominant social and economic parameters should take this propensity into account or else they minimise their chances of success.

All this is to say that neither morality nor science could ever totally control environmental action. Rather, nature as a moral category, and nature as a material reservoir of wealth and knowledge are two distinct arenas, each one of them informed by different propensities and different ends; morality to social cohesion, and materialism to individual well-being. Intellectuals, producers of images of meaningful and purposeful life and of 'cosmic orders,' bring the two aspects of nature together and in the process create images of harmony and disharmony of society with the cognisant world.

The employment of the term 'cosmic order' rather than 'ideology,' or 'worldview' is intentional, as cosmic order combines structuration and meaning with particular images of the material world, of our surroundings. A cosmic order, unlike the alternative terms, constitutes a diffused 'cosmos,' linking means with end values, scientific discourses with perceptions of risk, high morality with mundane behaviour, the 'above' with the 'below,' abstract images of a moral life with

individual habits and modes of action. It constitutes the thread that penetrates all aspects of environmentalism as by definition it brings a certain structure and meaning to the wide world shaping moral standards and guiding social action. Above all, it links our pre-modern past with our late, hyper-reflective modern civilization (vividly portrayed by Pardo and Prato), since it constitutes a simple narration of life, meaning, and eschatology. The link it creates is a substantial one, not in terms of technological means or knowledge, but in terms of the human psyche, of our predisposition to simplify complexity and lock our personal worldview on a simple and straightforward 'story.' Simplification is the locomotive of social action, no matter how complex and multifaceted the perceived external information we receive is. The Preacher who in the Book of Ecclesiastes declares '[t]he thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sun,' reflected on the human condition and the patterned mode of human behaviour. From this we can keep, as a working hypothesis, that our social action, the way we perceive our place in the world, what we see as morally right, and how we should act toward our final targets, also follows similar biased patterns, excluding, or minimizing, facts and possibilities that deviate, and embracing those that verify our ultimate values, our cosmic order.

Endnotes

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