

## Classics revisited: Tracing the Modern Origins of Ecopolitics

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◆ In 1970, 300,000 persons died in Bangladesh when a cyclone drove a huge wave over the Ganges delta, in what has been described as the greatest natural disaster in history. In 1984, the world was struck by the image of millions of Ethiopians dying of starvation. How many North Americans will perish when the San Andreas Fault moves once again sometime in the 21st century? All of these situations can be predicted well in advance. The Ganges delta is a flat lowland known for its climatic instability; at the beginning of the 1970s, Africa, which was essentially self-sufficient in food, began to show increasing signs of declining per capita grain production, and in 1906 San Francisco was literally destroyed by a major earthquake.

Notwithstanding the fact that two of these examples refer to natural disasters beyond human control, they all show a dramatic failure to cope with the laws of nature. Even in the case of San Francisco and Bangladesh, one may argue that by allowing human concentration in such highly unstable environments, we actually make those natural occurrences become disasters. There are undoubtedly social and political variables that account for this "failure", but they reveal as well a persistent disregard, both by social scientists and by decision-makers, of the rules that regulate the world surrounding us.

To incorporate an ecological framework into our economic and political decision-making – to take into account the implications of our public policies for the network of relations operating in ecosystems – have indeed turned into a biological necessity for survival. As A. F.

Coventry once stated, "we have for a long time been breaking the little laws, and the big laws are beginning to catch up with us." <sup>1</sup> But human beings do not function naturally, in a more or less automatic manner; they need conscious and deliberate actions to change course. By extension, an ecosocial system, which includes both natural and human systems, can transform itself only through the human ability to set and seek a predetermined goal.

Thus, to understand the implications of the ecological (scarcity of resources) and environmental (scarcity of "pollutable" reservoirs) crisis, one must attempt to grasp the social process behind it. And the possible solutions to these challenges must be found within the social system itself. As a matter of fact, adequate understandings of the ecological outcomes of the way people use the earth's resources are ultimately related to the modes of relationships amongst people themselves. Conversely, because the most basic resources, such as the food we eat, the water we drink, the air we breathe, and the materials with which we build and equip our shelters, are all provided by natural processes, contemporary politics stands on the ecological foundations of society. These entangled dynamics constitute, in a nutshell, the foundations of **ecopolitics**.

Karl DEUTSCH (1977), William OPHULS (1977) and Roberto GUIMARÃES (1986) were among the first to classify in these terms this new field of the social sciences, exploring an

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<sup>1</sup> Cited in G. Tyler Miller, Jr.: *Living in the Environment*, Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1979, p. 32.

unified approach to unveil both facets of the coupled ecological and social systems. Firstly, how to identify and analyze what characteristics of the natural environment contribute to the flourishing, maintenance and eventual demise of human societies. Secondly, to determine how social and political conditions affect natural systems, disturbing or reinforcing their life-support cycles. All of these contributions, and many others afterwards, benefitted and expanded the pioneering works of Nicholas GEORGESCU-ROETGEN (1971) in his attempt to integrate ecological knowledge in the social sciences.

According to Karl Deutsch original definition, ecopolitics

*“it asks about the viability of ecological and social systems, singly and in their ecosocial interplay, and about the possibility, desirability and limits of political intervention. Its approach rejects the romantic illusion that all natural ecological systems are necessarily viable. Most of the earth's deserts are not man-made. But it does insist that no social system can remain viable for long if it degrades or destroys its natural environment, or if it fails to save it from deterioration or self-destruction.”* (p.13).

There have emerged many ways to approach the study of ecopolitics, as there are also different levels of analysis developed through recent years. However, the original contributions object of this review focused on the *institutional, bureaucratic* and *power dimensions* of social systems and their impacts in social-ecological interplay. Sharing the same underlying approach more fully articulated by Deutsch, particular emphasis was placed by

Ophuls on the political economy aspects of ecopolitics, whereas Guimarães chose to unveil ecopolitics through the institutional and public policy elements that have evolved historically in the periphery of the world system.

For these purposes, the conceptual and methodological contributions of *ecopolitics* proved to be especially relevant. As Michael Kraft (1974) underlined, the traditional labels “environmental policy studies” or “environmental politics” were ambiguous, slightly inaccurate, and even seriously misleading in some respects. For one, the object of analysis is not the “environment” narrowly defined ---usually referred to as the characteristics of natural systems. Nor is the study related to a specific “sector” of governmental action, such as public policies designed to avoid or alleviate pollution. Finally, the ultimate goal is not to understand just how different social and political groups influence environmental policies as such but, rather, through the study of environmental problems brought up by economic growth, to understand how the political system operates. Other policy areas must, consequently, be considered when studying ecological policies, such as housing, science and technology, agriculture, land use, energy, conservation, transportation, and so forth.

Ecological politics, or *ecopolitics*, conveys the holistic idea that one must study the interrelationships of several public problems, much as the analysis of the principles of ecology reveals that in human, natural, and social life everything is to some extent connected to everything else. Decisions that seem desirable from a strictly environmental point of view will produce, more often than not, conflicts with economic decisions, be they market-oriented or arrived at through State-led initiatives. The term also stands for the

connections of different components of a political system, such as social stratification, the institutional arrangements of government, the distribution of power in the society, and the process of arriving at public decisions.

In short, *ecopolitics* emerges from the recognition that to overcome the current ecological crisis of sustainability ---poverty and social destitution coupled with scarcity and exhaustion of natural resources and environmental services--- political decisions will have to be made. In this process some interests will be favored over others, both within nations as well as between nations. To recognize the ecological roots of most of our current political problems is not only a matter of survival, but also a logical conclusion. Its urgency stems from the fact that time, the scarcest resource of all, is running out fast, or at least it is running out faster than the ability of our social and political institutions to face the reality of socio-ecological entanglements. The emergence of this new, ecopolitical dimension in our lives poses hitherto unforeseen challenges to the social sciences, and to the everyday concerns of citizens and governments as well. This has, of course, both theoretical and practical implications.

The roots of the ecological crisis trace back to the introduction of agricultural and pastoral activities. Until recently, however, human beings have been able to remain largely unaware of this. Now that human beings count themselves not in thousands but in billions, they cannot avoid recognizing their dependence on the exchanges between economic activities and natural systems. It is realistic to conclude that as a result of the same forces that allowed us to build complex and advanced societies, "many parts of nature are becoming more fragile in our hands--and our lives may become more fragile with them" (Deutsch, 1977, p. 4). This fragility

has become more fully apparent only recently, and many still do not appreciate it.

The development of civilization was, and in many respects still is, based on the naive and optimistic view that natural resources are practically inexhaustible. Despite that, the "environmental crisis" underneath the unsustainability of extant development styles underscores the fact that we are running out of resources and out of places to dispose of our wastes. These problems are not exclusive to rich or poor countries. Absolute and relative scarcity ---actual lack of resources and lack of access to resources--- equally affect central and peripheral nations. But we are also living in an era of scarcity of adequate institutions, and a scarcity of political will as well. The vast majority of our social and political institutions were not designed to tackle the basic dilemma of ecological scarcity; they can barely operate within its parameters, and they are ill-suited to solve it. Consequently, to understand the implications of the socio-ecological interplay for sustainable development, one must attempt to grasp the social process behind it. As suggested before, the ecological outcomes of the way people use the earth's resources are ultimately related to the modes of relationships amongst people, and the possible solutions to the crisis of sustainability must be found within the social system itself.

Yet, the issues that seem to permeate the political debate within and between nation-states bear little resemblance to ecopolitics. Certainly, there is much talk about starvation in Africa, the moral obligation to improve the distribution of resources on a global scale, and the need to reverse the degradation of tropical rain forests that harbor most species. Nonetheless, economic growth, national security and the well-being of private actors operating in the market place dominate the public agenda. Govern-

ments all over the developed world recognize that starvation, inequality, pollution, and the squandering of resources are all part of the same ecopolitical equation. At the same time, their actions fail to address fundamentally the nature of the environmental crisis.

The naiveté of many world leaders today recalls the example offered by Alvin TOFFLER (1974) about the simplemindedness of the elders of an Indian tribe that for centuries has lived off the produce of a river at its doorstep. Its culture and economy are based upon fishing, boat building, and harvesting the soil fertilized by the river, so that the future of this community merely repeats its past. But what happens when this tribe pursues its traditional style of development unaware that a dam is being built upstream? Short of an ecopolitical understanding, its image of the future is misleading, dangerously misleading, for the river will soon dry up or become a trickle. ♦

#### Reviewed Books:

DEUTSCH, Karl W. (1977) - *Eco-Social Systems and Eco-Politics: A Reader on Human and Social Implications of Environmental Management in Developing Countries*, París, UNESCO, 1977.

GEORGESCU-ROEGEN, Nicholas (1971). *Entropy Law and the Economic Process*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press.

GUIMARÃES, Roberto P. (1986). *Ecopolitics in The Third World: An Institutional Analysis of Environmental Management in Brazil*. Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT, published later as *The Ecopolitics of Development in the Third World: Politics and Environment in Brazil*, Boulder, CO and London, Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1991, 1994..

KRAFT, Michael E. (1974). “Ecological Politics and American Government: A Review Essay.” In Stuart Nagel, ed. *Environmental Politics*, New York, Praeger Publishers (pp 139-59).

OPHULS, William (1977). *Ecology and the Politics of Scarcity: Prologue to a Political Theory of the Steady State*, San Francisco, W. H. Freeman.

TOFFLER, Alvin (1974). “The Psychology of the Future.” In A. Toffler, *Learning for Tomorrow: The Role of the Future in Education*, New York, Random House.