
Green Democracy, Ecological Rationality

Hargrove (2000, 3) laments that decades after Earth Day, the environmental movement is still plagued by a serious gap between theory and practice. This observation follows his earlier assertion (1989, 3–4) that, although environmental ethics had made significant advances, it was no closer to becoming fully integrated into environmental affairs at a practical level than it had been twenty years before, in the early 1970s. Hargrove (1994, 115–116) also suggests one reason why this might be so, observing that the language being taught to environmental professionals is so stunted and shallow that it is unable to deal adequately, or even understand accurately, questions of moral value. If this is even approximately true (and there is no reason to believe that it is not), environmental ethics faces a communication gap of truly daunting proportions. By Hargrove's account, current environmental professionals are incapable of recognizing philosophical issues when they encounter them, much less of learning from philosophers how to deal with them.

And, yet, the fault may lie less in the stars than in ourselves. A review of journals such as *Environmental Values*, *Ethics and the Environment*, and *Environmental Ethics* reveals a startling array of topics that reflect the genuinely diverse membership of this scholarly community and the evolution of its interests. The largest number of articles pursue the entirely justifiable goal of exploring a relatively narrow environmental issue from a single philosophical perspective, with an emphasis on clarifying the grounds upon which an individual might build his or her own view of the subject. On only rare occasions (perhaps 5 percent of all articles) have the authors directly examined what political philosophy or a particular political philosopher might contribute to a practical environmental ethics

that would advance the cause of reconciling democratic politics and environmental protection. Little wonder that the field of environmental ethics remains distant from the arena in which environmental decisions are made.

At the same time, some argue that the scope and seriousness of the environmental problems confronting humankind have rendered liberal democratic government virtually obsolete (Heilbroner 1996; Ponting 1991; Stavrianos 1976). Among those holding this view, William Ophuls's analysis of the problem is one of the most wide-ranging and pessimistic. It is also likely that Ophuls has influenced the thinking of contemporary environmentalists more strongly than any other representative of this viewpoint. According to Ophuls (1977), humanity faces a future of lower living standards, population loss due to famine and disease, and a politics that is decidedly more authoritarian than any we would currently find acceptable. Ophuls (1997) claims that an individualistic and rights-based liberalism is fundamentally inadequate to meet the environmental challenge. Our real choice, he argues, is between an elite meritocracy, on the one hand, and an aristocratic oligopoly on the other.

There are, of course, those who would point to the indisputable achievements of industrial society, capitalism, and interest group democracy with respect to environmental policy over the four decades or so since the emergence of the environmental movement. In the wealthier countries, levels of many pollutants in air and water have been lowered (sometimes dramatically), some species have been saved, dramatic landscapes have been set aside, and economies have become more energy efficient. This wave of reform environmentalism succeeded in creating institutions and enacting rules that reduced the severity of many of the most blatant symptoms of environmental degradation (although sometimes by shifting the problems elsewhere). Yet these same policy efforts have not succeeded at all with respect to any problems not easily understood, not fixable without fundamental social, economic, or political changes, or not readily dramatized by electronic media. They have encountered increasing resistance from political and economic interests deeply vested in the status quo. Even within the wealthier countries, much less globally, progress toward the goals of sustainability or ecological rationality is difficult to discern with respect to, say, the six critical environmental problems (atmosphere, water re-

sources, oceans, soil, forests, living species) identified in the 1993 "World Scientists' Warning to Humanity," which was signed by 1,670 scientists from 71 countries including a majority of living Nobel Prize winners. The environmental protection achievements of four decades have given rise, as much as anything, to a widespread environmental complacency and to entrenched and even more sophisticated green opposition from political and economic interests. The resulting policy stalemate within liberal interest-group democracies seems destined to persist as long as interest-group democracy prevails, or until some external shock forces a fundamental realignment of the political system.

With these perspectives as part of their shared intellectual background, it is little wonder that liberal environmentalists would jump at the chance to redeem democracy and protect the environment simultaneously. (We are, after all, no less fond of our political theories than were the socialists who so enhanced the ecology of Eastern Europe.) Just such an opportunity has been presented by the recent turn in political theory toward deliberative, or discursive, democracy. First used by Joseph Bessette (1980), the phrase "deliberative democracy" defies precise definition. It roughly refers to a school of political theory that assumes that genuinely thoughtful and discursive public participation in decision making has the potential to produce policy decisions that are more just and more rational than existing representative mechanisms. The conviction among environmental theorists is that such an approach to democracy will also be more environmentally friendly than interest-group liberalism has been.

Liberal democracy, as it stands, can be criticized as *inherently* unfriendly to the environment because it takes human interests as the measure of all values (Mathews 1991). Any suggestion that the ecological failings of democracy can be cured by the application of more democracy is, therefore, in need of supportive argument. As Robert Goodin has correctly pointed out, "to advocate democracy is to advocate procedures, to advocate environmentalism is to advocate substantive outcomes" (1992, 168). But Goodin (1996) has also argued that discursive democracy in the public sphere creates a situation in which interests other than one's own are called to mind, including the interests of nature and of future generations.

So it may be that deliberative democracy has the potential to produce more environmentally sound decisions than does interest-group liberalism

because it allows citizens to develop a broadly ecological perspective. And that broader perspective is necessary for the adoption and dissemination of those ecocentric cultural views that are key to a green political transformation (Eckersley 1992). Furthermore, if the environment can profit from democracy, it may also be that democracy can gain from its newly won environmentalism. Whereas some have argued that nature has no political lessons to offer and that we should stop looking for any (Saward 1993), others have emphasized the social benefits to be derived from an ecological perspective. Jorge Valadez has argued that ecological consciousness “aids in discerning the actual and potential analogical relationships between the interdependencies in nature and those in the social realm” (2001, 21). Valadez has further argued that a shared ecological vision is one tool for cultivating intercultural solidarity within a multicultural society as well as the moral, cognitive, and affective character traits that are supportive of such solidarity. So even if there were not compelling independent reasons for adopting an ecological perspective, as Valadez acknowledges that there are, that perspective is something any multicultural society would want to encourage strictly for the sake of political unity.

But if environmentalists are to profit from what John Dryzek (2000) calls the “deliberative turn in democratic theory,” a better understanding of that turn and its implications is required.

Points of Departure

It is advisable at the outset of any discussion that might become complicated to define one's terms. This practice can be useful either as a mechanism for avoiding misunderstanding or as a means of short-circuiting the entire discussion (depending on one's motivations). Part of our task is easy. “Environmental democracy” can be defined as the making of environmental decisions under conditions described by Winston Churchill as the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried. But what are we to make of the term “deliberative”?

Assuming that our search for definitions is a well-intentioned one, it might be useful to continue our search for deliberative environmental democracy by suggesting what the term “deliberative” is *not* intended to describe. The concept of deliberation certainly suggests that democracy is more than simply a matter of securing personal liberty—in Lincoln's

famous phrase, to be neither slave nor master. If Lincoln's view is insufficiently sophisticated, perhaps a philosopher might help. For Socrates, democracy was characterized by a "forgiving spirit." It was "a charming form of government, full of variety and disorder, and dispensing a sort of equality to equals and unequals alike" (Plato, *The Republic*, book VIII). Socrates captures something of the egalitarianism commonly associated with democracy, but he also fails to suggest how the form of government might be described as deliberative.

Perhaps more useful is the observation by Reinhold Niebuhr (1944, xi) that "man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible; but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary." The clear implication is that democracy is an expression of the better instincts of humans, of our commitment to transcend private motivations somehow in favor of some form of social even-handedness. This view, linking democracy and justice as it does, certainly seems to suggest some form of deliberation, some collective agreement about how to arrange our social relations. But it also seems immediately to conflict with the interest-group liberalism that is virtually synonymous with democracy today.

The deliberative democracy movement has been spawned by a growing realization that contemporary liberalism has lost its democratic character just as it has also sacrificed its ecological sustainability. Modern democracies, confronted with cultural pluralism, social complexity, vast inequities of wealth and influence, and ideological biases that discourage fundamental change, have allowed their political institutions to degenerate into arenas for strategic gamesmanship in which there is no possibility for genuine deliberation (Bohman 1996, 18–24). Neither true democracy nor environmental protection is possible where citizens become mere competitors with no commitments beyond their own narrow self-interests.

Perhaps this is one reason why it is increasingly difficult to find anyone who defends interest-group liberalism as the best form of government to which we can reasonably aspire—not even the contemporary defenders of pluralism, such as the agonistic democrats who champion conflict in a radically pluralized political culture (Mouffe 1996; 1999; Gabardi 2001). From an environmental point of view, the contest of interest groups for their own advantage is widely seen as a significant contributor to ecological degradation (Ophuls and Boyan 1992). How to move beyond interest-group liberalism is, of course, a matter open to considerable debate. From

a more political perspective, Theodore Lowi (1979) criticized this form of democracy for its surrender of legitimate authority to the private administration of a fragmented pluralism and for its tendency to produce policy without law. In short, Lowi accuses interest-group liberalism of squandering that most hard won prize of every free people: popular sovereignty. From a communitarian perspective, the value of pluralism, associated with interest-group liberalism, has been criticized for depriving democracy of its ability to make even the most basic and obvious moral distinctions (Tam 1998, 54–56).

Whereas Lowi's analysis of democracy focuses on the preoccupation with groups, and communitarians are concerned primarily with the reduction of moral values to mere interests, deliberative democrats presume that the essence of democracy is deliberation rather than voting, interest aggregation, or rights. Deliberative democracy has a distinguishing core set of propositions, namely: political equality of participants; interpersonal reasoning as the guiding political procedure; and the public giving, weighing, acceptance, or rejection of reasons (Parkinson 2003, 180). A broadly acceptable definition of deliberative democracy might be a requirement that a society's processes for political choice be so designed and maintained that "outcomes will be continuously apprehensible as products of collective deliberation conducted rationally and fairly among free and equal individuals" (Michelman 1997, 149). In short, "the essence of democratic legitimacy is the capacity of those affected by a collective decision to deliberate in the production of that decision" (Dryzek and List 2003, 1).

It is probably not overstating the case to say that the field of democratic theory has been transformed by the development of the concept of deliberative democracy. For many, deliberation has now become the *sine qua non* for democratic practice. A deliberative approach to all of the policy problems facing modern democracies seems, to many, to be the only way to overcome the failings of interest-group liberalism.

The theory of democracy may have taken a strong deliberative turn in recent decades, but movement by the many participants in this theoretical dance was hardly synchronous. Various distinct versions or models of deliberative democracy can be identified in the literature, of which three perhaps are most significant: one anchored in the theory of justice of John

Rawls; a second derived from the critical theory of Jürgen Habermas; and a third advanced by Bohman, Gutmann and Thompson, and others, that embraces and seeks to realize the traditional tenets of liberal constitutionalism. In this book we examine each of these variants in depth (chapters 3–6), before undertaking an analysis of the implications of each of them for institutions, citizens, experts, and social movements in an environmental democracy (chapters 7–10).

But any effort to bring the advantages of deliberative democracy to the arena of environmental decision making seems destined to encounter at least one fundamental obstacle. In order to understand this obstacle clearly and to find a path around it, we must begin with a general understanding of what deliberative democracy is and its philosophical foundations.

Although many elements of any definition of deliberative democracy beg definitions of their own, it is evident that deliberative democracy is (at least in part) an effort to realize more fully the dreams of the Enlightenment. Locke, Condorcet, Helvetius, and many of their contemporaries advanced a philosophy of reason through which humankind might throw off centuries of superstition and dogma to achieve a reconciliation with nature and set an upward course of collective progress. This it would do, in part, through institutions of democratic self-government characterized by a system of individual rights, an extensive (and expanding) franchise, and a system of universal education. Thus our modern notions of democracy are as easily recognized as products of the Enlightenment as are the methods of modern science.

Deliberative democrats have no more reason to shy away from democracy's connection to the Enlightenment than do other democratic theorists. In fact, they should be more eager to embrace it. In deliberative democracy, there is a strong emphasis on creating a public sphere in which the competing claims of citizens can be evaluated for their validity rather than their mere popularity. The objective is to move the views of participants toward a reasoned consensus based on sound argument and reliable evidence (Habermas 1997; 1996; 1995). This cognitive quality of deliberative democracy should mean that rational inquiry is more important to this view of politics than to most others. The difficulty arises, however, when one begins to explore the applicability of this more rational and cognitive version of democracy to the problem of environmental protection.

There is a widely shared view in the environmental community that modern ecological problems are nature's revenge on our individualistic, rationalized society for its oppressiveness (Alford 1985). This indictment of our Enlightenment political culture has to do, in the first instance, with its bent toward a technoscientific worldview. Horkheimer and Adorno (1972) traced the roots of the individualism and scientific domination of nature that are characteristic of Enlightenment democracies to their roots in our Greco-Roman past and explored the possible consequences of these trends for modern humans. They foresaw a revolt of human nature against the endlessly delayed gratification that results from the perpetual search for new technological capabilities necessary for continued reproduction of a society whose social relations are fundamentally irrational. The frustration that results from modernity's permanent delay of human gratification makes its domination of nature ultimately unsustainable. So the enterprise of the Enlightenment is thus destined to be thwarted by its own internal contradictions. More recently, it has been argued that another contradiction of the Enlightenment (not discussed by Horkheimer and Adorno) is the revolt of nonhuman nature against its irrational exploitation (Leiss 1972). The unrestrained use of nature destroys the material conditions for its own continuation, as the inexorable expansion of capital at the expense of the environment undercuts our natural resource base (Merchant 1989).

Modern science is also indicted by environmentalists for its mechanistic assumptions and narrow definition of what constitutes a fact (Devall and Sessions 1985), as well as for its cognitive orientation toward the substantive rather than the relational (Valadez 2001). These tendencies, it is argued, operate to blind modern science to ecological concerns (which are rarely mechanical or narrow in scope and are always relational in character). In addition to this cognitive disadvantage, modern science is accused of being ill suited from a political viewpoint to the needs of a truly democratic society. Science, it is argued, is largely closed to the oppressed and disadvantaged (Jennings and Jennings 1993) and is a conceptual element of a patriarchic social structure that represses women as much as it does nature (Evans 1995).

Finally, it is argued that even the scientific detachment that lies at the heart of the research process is ecologically self-defeating. This detached attitude has been associated with an estrangement from human emotion

and ethical principle that allows even those whose careers involve the study of nature to participate in its devaluation (Gismondi and Richardson 1994). All of these criticisms have led many to conclude that science, insofar as it applies to intervention in nature, will inevitably lead us to disaster (Dizard 1993). These views have led to a deep suspicion of the scientific establishment among environmental activists, which creates a gulf that is difficult to bridge (Foreman 2002).

A different perspective on science is offered by a number of environmentalists who, while not entirely uncritical of the technoscientific character of modern democracies, are nevertheless convinced of the possibility (and necessity) of bringing both science and democracy to the fight for environmental protection. To begin with, they point out that it is impossible even to recognize an environmental crisis as such without a good deal of technical and scientific sophistication (Kirkman 2002). This remains true even if the production of knowledge arises from technical cognitive interests—the economic exploitation or mechanical control of objects—leading to a risk of “problem closure” that obscures other significant interests (Habermas 1974).

Moreover, the very nature of modern society has changed in ways that move science and technology to the center of our concerns. Since the end of World War II, postindustrial countries (the United States in particular) have experienced a transition from an administrative to a scientific state with an agenda heavily laden with difficult scientific issues. As a result, scientific and technological thought permeates our modern language and cultural processes (Schmandt and Katz 1986). This growing dependency on science and technology has led Habermas (1996) to observe that the challenges to contemporary society make such a high demand on the analytical and prognostic skills of government, as well as government’s readiness to act to protect citizens from risk, that the problems of strict statutory control associated with democratic accountability are dramatically exacerbated. We are, thus, confronted with the additional challenge of assessing and amending government utilization of science and technology at a time when controlling those practices is increasingly difficult. And the stakes are high because a society that is unable to adapt its “forms of epistemic authority and institutional practice” to the ecosystem relations on which it relies is likely to fall victim to its own “ecologically irrational” behavior (Dryzek 1987, 245).

Finally, even though there are risks associated with embracing modern science as an essential element of the deliberative process, doing so is probably necessary for entirely political reasons. It very likely is the case that “the authority of science” needs to be brought to bear in the service of ecological literacy if an enlightened perspective on the environment is to “have sufficient credibility to create the general agreement that environmentally sound policies should be adopted” (Valadez 2001, 363). Even so strong a critic of science’s bias toward technical interests as Jürgen Habermas (1970; 1971) has acknowledged that traditional social structures are increasingly subordinated to conditions of instrumental rationality and that this subordination extends across the organization of labor and trade, information and communication, and finance and government. Habermas concludes that this trend is so broad and relentless that we must not accept the “pessimistic assertion that technology excludes democracy,” even if we discount the optimist’s dream of a “convergence of technology and democracy” (Habermas 1970, 60).

But the rationality gained through “specialized and competent fulfillment” of social tasks by experts is no protection against the paternalism and “self-empowerment” of administrative agencies (Habermas 1996, 189). What is needed is a more focused production of information about environmental challenges, goals, and progress that is broadly known, regularly reviewed, and used as the basis for strategy development, tactics formation, and resource allocation by agencies charged with environmental protection (Metzenbaum 2002). And it goes without saying that this process of information generation and deployment must involve frequent and meaningful opportunities for deliberative input from as many interested citizens as can be accommodated. This necessity has both political and cognitive dimensions.

In a democratic society, experts cannot assume that their special knowledge will have an impact on environmental decisions unless “they can successfully take on the lay perspective” (Bohman 1996, 64). The legitimacy of the deliberative process itself requires that citizens should not merely defer to authority or alleged expertise (Dryzek 2000). And if, as theorists of deliberation suggest, democracy is more than simply the aggregation of preferences, then the discursive feature of law-making must be crucial to understanding law’s claim to legitimacy. Since the legitimacy of law de-

depends on self-legislation, the sources of democracy must be linked with the formal decision making process (Avio 1999).

Moreover, the scientific worldview has a significant conceptual blind spot, which only the involvement of lay decision-makers can correct. Science and technology can know nature only in instrumental terms, because it is only in this way that science can be effective in securing the material preconditions for human survival (Habermas 1987a). But “as soon as specialized knowledge is brought to politically relevant problems, its unavoidably normative character becomes apparent,” setting off controversies that polarize citizens and the experts themselves (Habermas 1996, 351). There is no human experience that abides as a scientific “fact” without an element of valid interpretation having been imparted to it (Polanyi 1964). Science, like any other general view of things, is “highly stable and can be effectively opposed, or rationally upheld, only on grounds that extend over the entire experience of man” (Polanyi 1964, 10). For science to guide environmental policy effectively, it must be constantly subjected to a critical political ecology that “eschews meta-narratives or received wisdom about environmental degradation, and instead adopts a critical attitude to how such supposedly neutral explanations of ecological reality were made” (Forsyth 2003, 267). The empirical-analytical capacities of science cannot themselves attach social and political interpretations to their products. It is in this sense, perhaps, that Habermas argues that “access to the facts is provided by the understanding of meaning, not observation” (1971, 309).

For ordinary citizens to play the role of critical auditor of the social and political meaning of scientific and technological advances would seem to be a tall order. But a hopeful attitude toward the problem is not unreasonable. Enlightenment values may have penetrated mass culture sufficiently to give rise to a “cognitive populism” that makes citizens willing to perform this function (Gunderson 2000, 144–145). In his discussion of the relationship between experts and citizens in the deliberative process, James Bohman optimistically argues that “the layperson can take on the perspective of the expert by becoming a well informed citizen” (1996, 64). If all of this is so, it would seem to sustain the belief advanced by Aristotle (*Politics*, book III, chap. 11) that when average citizens meet together, their perceptions combined with those of the “better classes” are quite

sufficient to the public purpose. Determining whether this optimism is justified necessitates examining closely the assumptions and manifestations of differing approaches to the deliberation project and assessing their consequences and significance in terms of democratic institutions, citizenship, expertise, and social movements. We return to a fuller consideration of the implications of the Enlightenment for deliberative democratic practice in chapter 11.

Meanwhile, whether deliberative democracy and ecological rationality might ultimately be reconciled is not obvious. A vast theoretical literature about deliberative democracy has insufficiently confronted three criticisms that get at the heart of its usefulness to practical environmental politics of the twenty-first century. These criticisms are: (1) that deliberative democracy is crippled by utopianism; (2) that it has ignored the implications of potential empirical evidence about its premises and claims; and (3) that it cannot be reconciled with the competing, conflicting imperatives of the natural world, of global market capitalism, and of the administrative state. Those criticisms had left the theory of deliberative democracy at the margins of creative thinking about the politics of the environmental problematique until only recently, when serious challenges to them began to appear in the literature.

In fact, a close examination reveals these criticisms to be less than compelling. The theory of deliberative democracy offers the foundation for a possible and practical reconciliation of rationality, strong democracy, and demanding environmentalism. Much evidence can be found both in a careful reanalysis of basic approaches to thinking about deliberative democracy and in the applied world of contemporary environmental policy and politics.

The rationale of this book is that ecological rationality, substantive democratic governance, and policy reasonableness all require deliberation, both in the sense of contemplative decision making and in the sense of collective inclusive discourse. Our approach in this book is, first, to explore these interrelationships; second, to examine critically three main alternative constructs or models for deliberative democracy and to analyze their potential and implications for ecologically rational and reasonable environmental politics; and third, to explore what these three conceptions of deliberative democracy mean for institutions, citizens, experts, and social movements with respect to any practical reconciliation of democracy

and environmentalism. The objectives of this book are important for reasons that are simultaneously theoretical and policy practical. First, there is a need to better establish that democracy, in the form most worth having, is ecologically sustainable. Second, borrowing a distinction of Habermas's, modernity needs to know that environmental protection can (and must) become a norm of culture rather than a mere fact of modern government. Both needs require development of models of ecological deliberation and deliberative environmentalism.