

Building an Empirical Case for Ecological Democracy

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ABSTRACT

The concept of ecological democracy has been employed to illustrate how rapid ecological and environmental change poses significant problems for existing democratic structures. If the term is to prove useful, however, it must be better conceptualized and empirically tested. This article addresses this challenge by first outlining key empirical intersections of environment and democracy, then providing a working definition of ecological democracy. Four plausible research hypotheses are also recommended to guide future analyses of ecological democracy.

KEYWORDS

citizen, democracy, environment, justice, participatory, sociology, sustainable, politics.



Introduction

Many scholars agree that environmental controversies and crises alike are increasing, and recognize that a certain degree of dynamism exists between ecology and democracy, suggesting the need to pay closer attention to this relationship. This has led to considerable conceptual and philosophical works on environmental politics, along with the development of new terms such as “ecological democracy” (Mitchell 2006, 2007; Ungaro 2005; Shutkin 2000; Mason 1999; Morrison 1995).

Until now, like other related terms, ecological democracy has had little application, largely due to its inherent vagueness and inadequate empirical attention. This short inquiry adds to this research by highlighting existing scholarship on the concept, including literature that at least *indirectly* addresses key empirical intersections among democracy and ecology. I also suggest some research hypotheses to guide future analyses of ecological democracy.



Existing Empirical Intersections

While much of the literature on ecological democracy has remained largely theoretical and prescriptive thus far, a number of research endeavors reveal several suggestive indicators of the dynamism implicit in this relationship. Before looking more closely at the notion of ecological democracy, I list here a handful of illustrative examples of empirical intersections linking decision-making arrangements with the environment.

Environmental Degradation in the Absence of Democracy

It is commonly held that opportunities for environmental degradation are augmented both quantitatively and qualitatively in undemocratic settings. One could readily point to the acute environmental degradation characteristic of many former Communist countries to suggest that the lack of democracy is associated with environmental decline (Winslow 2005). However, some research has shown that democratization or capitalization do not necessarily suppress environmental degradation nor reduce consumption-based environmental impacts. For example, one cross-national comparison among 208 countries showed that, on average, more powerful countries consume biospheric resources (i.e., ecological footprint) at higher per capita levels than less powerful, non-core countries (Jorgenson 2003). Moreover, the existence of formal democracy does not inherently protect certain groups from the inequitable distribution of environmental goods and bads; liberal democracies have become increasingly ineffective at instilling participatory forms of decision making. Also, several case studies of resource-dependent communities and regions, democratic or otherwise, illustrate how rapid development, driven by powerful corporate or state entities, has led to extraordinary levels of environmental degradation (Kousis 1998; Bunker 1985).

Antidemocratic Tendencies in Environmental Management

The prevalence of scientific experts in environmental decision making is often justified by the scientific complexity and uncertainty of many environmental and ecological dilemmas (Cortner 2000; Kroll-Smith et al. 1997; Beck 1995; Okrent 1980). Experts are not only placed in central decision-making positions, but the ambiguous nature of many environmental risks also renders laypersons dependent upon such

experts—not only to devise solution alternatives, but to convey the very meaning of crises and risks. A number of studies have illustrated the frustrated struggles of laypersons to impress their concerns upon these scientific experts and environmental managers in public debates (Cortner 2000; Richardson, Sherman and Gismondi 1993; Brown and Mikkelsen 1990; Levine 1982), compelling many to engage with scientists by becoming so-called citizen experts themselves (Tesh 1999), thus increasing the robustness of environmental decision making (Gross and Hoffmann-Riem 2005; Nowotny, Scott, and Gibbons 2001).

Private Property Ownership and Ecological Management

Democracy and liberty have been deeply embedded in the rights to property ownership, particularly in the United States. This raises several problems for protecting ecosystems at the landscape level, some of which have come to light in recent years. The first has been the acute reaction by typically rural property owners to the implementation of environmental policies, such as the United States Endangered Species Act, that pose the prospect of restricting land use and development and hence the rights of the property owner (Innes et al. 1998; Dwyer et al. 1995). These debates have become so acute that Canadian policymakers, for instance, have felt it necessary to incorporate a compensation clause into their proposed Species at Risk Act. On the other hand, nonindustrial property-owning neighbors may lament the fact that industrial property rights appear to be far more liberal than the rights governing their own actions (Davidson 2001).

Global Inequalities and Environmental Empiricism

At the 1992 Rio Summit on the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), countries of the North squared off with those of the South under the general rubric of consensus building on sustainable development. Subsequent debates revealed divergent goals of sustainable development, however, in which the North focused on long-term risks associated with global environmental change, while the South defined sustainability in terms of livelihood concerns (Redclift and Sage 1998; see also Langhelle 2000). To the extent that Northern representatives have maintained control over international environmental political discourse, this represents so-called green imperialism (Shiva 1993), or the imposition of strict environmental standards to protect global ecological resources by taking away the

rights of impoverished countries to develop or even define their own priorities. Such tensions raise the question as to whether global environmental problems can really be addressed in a socially equitable and democratic manner.

Environmental Crisis as Mobilizing Mechanism

Another context in which the tension between environment and democracy is highlighted includes the numerous instances of political reaction to the inequitable distribution of environmental ills. The concentration of pollution and its impacts in certain neighbourhoods and among certain groups (particularly women and minorities) (Cole and Foster 2001; Szasz 1994; Bullard 1993), as well as rapid resource development in newly industrializing regions with lax environmental standards (Fritz 1999), have given rise to locally based, ecologically democratic initiatives (e.g., Bray 1995). The subsequent environmental justice movement has been treated with tremendous optimism for its potential to reform environmental politics in a manner that prioritizes social welfare and democratic decision making (Martinez-Alier 2000; Capek 1993). In short, the response by many communities to perceptions of environmental injustices may represent an avenue for the reinvigoration of, and the formation of new modes of exercise for, participatory democracy in modern social systems.

Defining Ecological Democracy

The preceding examples serve to illustrate the complexities inherent to the positing of ecological democracy. Furthermore, if related and more commonly accepted terms such as sustainable development and ecological modernization also suffer from definitional inconsistencies and ambiguities (Langhelle 2000), what hope is there for ecological democracy? One way to begin is to offer a reasonable definition of the term and build an empirical research framework from there.

While few scholars provide an explicit definition of ecological democracy, the concept (or some variant) has been employed to illustrate the means by which rapid ecological and environmental change pose significant problems for existing democratic structures, and to prescribe alternative decision-making processes that are more conducive to ensuring ecological well-being. In related research, I have



defined ecological democracy as an alternative democratic model that 1. strives to incorporate interested citizens into environmental decision making, and 2. lacks structural features that systematically concentrate environmental amenities into the hands of particular social groups, while imposing environmental and ecological degradation on others (Mitchell 2006, 2007). If we can accept this definition as theoretically possible, then what research is required to test some of the aforementioned and other empirical intersections?

Future Research on Ecological Democracy

Several hypotheses on ecological democracy emerge from this exploratory review for continued research and testing:

1. Extreme regional resource scarcity or environmental degradation may restrict opportunities for ecological democracy if an equitable distribution of regionally accessible goods is insufficient to meet the needs of the regional population, or if environmental quality is so poor that it remains irreversibly beyond the ability to support life. Thus, the potential for the emergence of ecological democracy is most likely in those middle-of-the-road scenarios in which resources are in sufficiently short supply to warrant compromises on the level of individual consumption, or in which the environment is sufficiently degraded to cause alarm, but realistic hope remains that both democratic and environmental improvement are possible.
2. We are unlikely to see a so-called global civil society adoption of ecological democracy. Manifestations of ecological democracy, or the lack thereof, will assume specific forms defined by regional disparities in ecological, cultural, and sociopolitical preconditions. Consequently, regional parameters involving societal and ecological rights and values (both human and non-human) should represent a central component for any environmental decision-making framework.
3. Ecological democracy is most likely to emerge among cultures that have expressed a history of strong participatory action at the local level. Examples of this modern phenomenon of locally successful efforts that have garnered international attention and support include the Chipko movement in India, the rub-

ber tappers of Amazonian Brazil following the 1988 assassination of Chico Mendes, and the community forestry movement in Mexico and other countries.

4. Growing skepticism regarding the merits of a techno-scientific approach to environmental and ecological crises will be a primary motive for ecological democracy mobilizations. Unless more holistic and integrated scientific processes with active citizen involvement in policymaking are implemented (see, e.g., Cortner 2000), such skepticism and subsequent mobilizations will likely continue.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to look at empirical intersections of ecological democracy. Five empirical examples were provided that include environmental degradation under autocratic circumstances, antidemocratic tendencies in environmental management, private property ownership and ecological management, global inequalities and environmental empiricism, and environmental crisis as a mobilizing mechanism. After providing a theoretical definition of ecological democracy, I provided several hypotheses for continued research on ecological democracy.

Perhaps, ironically, ecological crises such as rapid deforestation and the melting of polar ice caps due to global warming represent central components in democratic processes. Ecological crises have served as a rather significant mobilization mechanism, particularly for those local people faced with restricted civil liberties, and new crises may place pressure on institutional mechanisms for increased openness and transparency. Civic mobilizing efforts often lead to the establishment of new arenas for political participation. Nonetheless, at least one key question can be asked: if the goals of ecological and democratic sustainability are not integrated through civic actions and inclusive policy, can it be possible to achieve either condition? Although there are no easy solutions, more empirical research on the connection between ecological and democratic principles and practices will help clarify some of these ambiguities.



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