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THEMATIC ESSAY

Democracy and the Environment: An Ecological Economics Research Agenda

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1. INTRODUCTION

This essay offers a brief overview of some of the key arguments about the relationship between democracy and the environment. Each of these arguments centres on the different dimensions of the relationship between democracy and the environment. The goal is to inform new research in ecological economics, so that it may engage more centrally with social science research—especially in the area of the political economy of institutions, which is my area of expertise. To this end, I begin with an overview of the assumptions that inform competing perspectives on the role of the state, markets, and citizens in environmental policymaking and enforcement.¹

2. STATES AND MARKETS: TWO DOMINANT PILLARS OF ENVIRONMENTAL GOVERNANCE

One dominant way of thinking about environmental governance considers environmental protection an uncontroversial and politically neutral policy agenda that the state is duty-bound to pursue. It holds that inadequate state capacity, especially in developing countries, is the main barrier to the success of environmental governance. This core assumption explains why

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¹ Scrutinizing the assumptions that inform a theory or model is at the core of positive theory building, and is not the same as engaging in interpretive analysis. A detailed discussion of these differences is beyond the scope of this essay. For an excellent scrutiny of some of the foundational concepts in environmental policy, see Bromley (2004).

international agencies often emphasize the need to invest in a state's organizational capacity, and in its legal infrastructure, which is needed to support the effective enforcement of environmental laws and regulations. The role of democracy is circumscribed by the assumptions about the liberal state's core functions—for example, protecting the freedom of information and of the press, and the independence of the judiciary, which ensures that the state enforces its environmental laws within a rule-of-law framework.

The institutions of democracy also have a representative function—that is, they are supposed to represent the interests of the majority. However, such interests are often precluded from national environmental governance, especially in developing countries, because of the underlying assumption that most citizens are too poor to care about the environment and are stuck in a poverty-environment trap. This assumption is the basis of ecological modernization, a thesis which remains popular in the field of environmental economics. A recent review of the scholarship on poverty traps shows that scholars of ecological economics are expanding their scope of analysis to include socio-ecological systems. Even so, they do not pay adequate attention to the 'interdependencies between ecological and social processes that affect the provision and use of natural capital and thus the persistence of poverty' (Haider *et al.* 2018).

Market-based governance of the environment—using tools such as cap and trade, reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation in developing countries (REDD+), and payment for environmental services—has gained popularity in recent times. Noticeably, it is informed by the core tenets of the liberal democratic framework, albeit with a significantly attenuated role for the state (Sampford 2002). In this perspective, properly regulated markets, functioning under the strict oversight of regulators held accountable by public watchdogs, will respond to incentives for efficient and eco-friendly production processes. While state institutions and regulatory functions are critical to the effective functioning of markets in any context, the ideology of untethered free markets has infiltrated the arguments for market-based environmental governance (McCarthy 2012), which is increasingly being reduced to purely voluntarist actions on the part of market actors. However, Peter Dauvergne (2015) shows that relying on corporations to voluntarily make production and consumption processes more efficient encourages the 'business of more'—more revenues, more stores, more profits—as corporations invest the gains from efficient production in expanding their supply chain and finding new consumers. Market-based environmentalism, as practised in most cases, is undermining efforts to promote social justice, economic inequality, and ecological integrity; yet, from an institutionalist perspective, markets can be governed

in a variety of ways, and thereby lead to varying effects on the goals of ecological conservation and social justice (Dauvergne 2015; Corbera *et al.* 2007; Lele *et al.* 2010; Kashwan 2017).

In markets, state intervention—such as through taxes, subsidies, or other kinds of incentives and disincentives—could play an important role in ecological protection (Bagstad *et al.* 2007). Yet, the success of such instruments depends critically on a well-functioning state machinery that—even without heavy-handed interventions—prompts non-state actors to comply. In societies with effective states, such regulatory success may create an impression that the state has very little role to play in environmental governance, and lead some—in countries without an effective state machinery—to overestimate the potential contribution of transparency and disclosure in ensuring market-based environmental governance (for a critical review of this, see Haufler 2010).

3. VARIETIES OF ENVIRONMENTALISM: IMPLICATIONS FOR ECOLOGICAL ECONOMICS

Earlier, I described the two dominant approaches to environmental governance. Each assumes a monolithic and apolitical understanding of the environment. However, these assumptions are challenged by the scholarship on varieties of environmentalism, which posits at least two competing types: environmentalism of the rich, which goes beyond market-based environmentalism to also include state-dominated approaches; and environmentalism of the poor, which puts poor people at the centre of environmental governance.

The main feature of the environmentalism of the rich is that it values the environment for its aesthetic value and brackets it away from society, which it supposes is dominated by values of consumption. Such assumptions—clearly a legacy of the compartmentalization of nature and society in post-industrial societies—prompt the likes of Harvard evolutionary biologist E.O. Wilson (2016) to advocate setting aside half the earth exclusively for the goals of nature conservation. We have extensive evidence to show that such enclosures trigger land conflicts, social injustices, and human rights violations (Kashwan 2013; Duffy 2016). However, what is less often discussed is that the enclosure-based model of protected areas has not been an outstanding conservation success either. A fine-grained analysis of British plants and animals showed that two of the main premises for setting up protected areas do not hold up to empirical evidence (Prendergast *et al.* 1993): (1) species-rich areas (‘hotspots’) frequently do not coincide for different taxa; and (2) many rare species do not occur in the most species-

rich squares. Recent research shows that little has changed in nearly a quarter century since. Conservation biologists show that even if one were to assume that every species present in a legally designated area is effectively protected, 20 per cent of threatened species remain beyond the purview of protected areas, while the biodiversity in many protected areas is not critically endangered (Rodrigues *et al.* 2004; Naughton-Treves *et al.* 2005). These findings reinforce the argument that the rapid growth in protected areas witnessed since the 1970s has been driven by political-economic interests—as opposed to a sincere effort to protect ecosystems (Kashwan 2017a). Therefore, contentions over protected areas are about whose vision of—and interests in—the natural environment this model of conservation promotes, and not about trade-offs between the environment and development.

Environmentalism of the poor presents an alternative lens for thinking about these debates. In this perspective, environmentalism is a product of ‘actions and concerns in situations where the environment is a source of livelihood’ (Martinez-Alier 2014, 240). In the face of threats to their livelihood, those affected are likely to act, especially under the conditions of successful institutions of democracy. Former Minister of Environment and Forests (India) Jairam Ramesh refers to this as ‘livelihood environmentalism’ (Ramesh 2010). A focus on livelihood dependence, as opposed to a focus on the poor, reduces the risk that poor people’s interests in and views about the environment are ‘essentialized.’ To meet livelihood goals, productive use of environmental resources is required. To develop models of environmental governance that promote such productive use, interdisciplinary research is needed into the links between social justice and concerns of land productivity; protection of water bodies and of grazing lands and forests; and preservation of sacred places (Ramesh 2015). This points to a productive agenda for ecological economics research that links wildlife and biodiversity conservation to productive, healthy, and socially just landscapes.

Agricultural practices developed by indigenous and other rural groups often existed in tandem with the non-domesticated parts of natural landscapes. Such practices are captured in the phrase ‘agrarian environments’ (Agrawal and Sivaramakrishnan 2000), and in recent arguments about reconsidering the binary of land and water within the rubric of ‘hybrid environments’ (Lahiri-Dutt 2014). Research by ecologists in tropical landscapes shows that the best conservation outcomes occur when fragmented biodiverse landscapes are surrounded by high-quality agriculture matrices. Ecologists argue that small-scale farming coupled with alternative agro-ecological techniques—as opposed to industrial monocultural agriculture—lead to such outcomes (Perfecto and Vandermeer 2010). These arguments about

the intricate links between nature and society question the applicability of popular models of land-sparing and forest transition to most parts of the world (for an excellent argument, see, Tschardt *et al.* 2012).

The brief discussion above suggests that there are diverse ways of conceptualizing the nature-society relationship, each with significantly different implications about the links between the environment, development, and social justice. Some authors have used these insights to do critical scholarship that deploys an interpretive methodology. The fundamental insight from this literature is that different conceptualizations of the environment inform competing perspectives about environmental governance. By bringing concrete interdisciplinary insights to these debates, and thereby illuminating them, ecological economists can help policymakers determine how the different configurations of nature-society relations would affect the goals of social justice and ecological restoration. Making such research findings available is an extremely valuable activity in a society, even though political and policy processes heavily influence how policy problems are framed, policies designed, and programmes implemented (Kashwan 2017). This brings us back to the role that institutions of democracy have to play in environmental conservation, and the implications for ecological economics research, which are the topics of the concluding section below.

4. INSTITUTIONS OF DEMOCRACY AND ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION

The highly schematized arguments presented above suggest that effective environmental governance rarely results from thinking about nature and society in isolation or antagonism and relying on the fiat of the state, or the invisible hand of markets, which are the dominant ways of thinking about ecological conservation. Conventional approaches to forest and wildlife conservation that rely on enclosures and exclusions do not yield superior conservation outcomes but impose significant social costs. The existence and well-being of nature and society are closely intertwined, and can be managed only by cultivating a set of social, cultural, and economic relations. In the complex societies of developing countries, however, social, cultural, and economic relations contribute to ecological stewardship only if such relations are institutionalized appropriately—in this context, institutionalization means a society-wide acceptance of the rules, norms, and conventions meant to steer nature-society interactions.

As discussed above, one of the core functions of democracy is the representation of social interests within the political and policy arenas. Even

though democracies with majoritarian voting systems are meant to represent the interests of the majority, they often fail at it, and end up with systems that are dominated by powerful interests. Worldwide, new empirical research shows, economic inequality—coupled with poor democratic institutions—contributes to the designation of a larger proportion of national territories as protected areas; yet, in well-established democracies, inequality acts as a barrier against designation of protected areas (Kashwan 2017a). Inequality presents a significant barrier to both democracy and environmental governance. When seen in conjunction with the findings reported above—high-quality agriculture matrices are important for successful conservation outcomes—these findings present a unique research opportunity for ecological economists.

The discussion above brings up a research question worth pursuing: In the presence of appropriate social relations and institutions, does the diversity of human interests (political and economic pluralism) support biological diversity? Future research could test this hypothesis by combining ecological and social science research. Students of ecology could examine the scale at which the diversity of human interests may not only coexist with biological diversity but promote it. Imagine two cross-cutting matrices: the diversity of human interests intersecting with biodiversity (technically speaking, gamma diversity defined as a function of the within-habitat diversity, that is, alpha diversity, and the cross-habitat diversity, that is, beta diversity) (Swift *et al.* 2004). These relationships can be tested through a combination of ecological and social science research within settings that offer opportunities to study the effects of different types of institutional arrangements. The following concrete examples illustrate how such a research programme might be operationalized in rural and urban settings.

The first illustration, of the institutionalization of innovative rules of social and environmental engagement, relates to the provisions of critical wildlife habitats (CWH) in India's Forest Rights Act (FRA). If a committee of biological and social scientists, elected representatives, and social activists set up specifically for the purpose concludes after investigation that the exercise of forest rights in a forestland may cause 'irreversible damage' to critically endangered biodiversity or wildlife, that area may be declared a CWH. In such cases, people living in a CWH may be relocated, but only after their forest and land rights have been recorded and the state guarantees livelihood security for the affected families. The FRA's CWH provisions can greatly enhance the legitimacy of conservation institutions and create many opportunities for policy-relevant research on the relationship between social organization and biodiversity conservation. However, such opportunities are being frittered away at the behest of a state machinery that has gotten used to a territorial—as opposed to an

institutional—approach to biodiversity and wildlife conservation (see Kashwan 2016).

The evolution of ‘eco-political’ change in Denmark presents another interesting illustration of the research programme proposed above. Læssøe (2007, 231–232) argues that Denmark’s environmental governance has evolved from a grassroots movement—characterized by contestation of values and political ideology—to professionally and commercially mediated consensus in favour of *laissez faire*. At the same time, as evident in the debates over ecological tax reform (ETR), Denmark continues to work to secure the widest possible social acceptability. Klok *et al.* (2006) attribute the limited acceptance of ETR to their observation that ETR proponents oversold the environmental benefits while not investing enough to popularize its social and economic benefits. These findings challenge many of the popular beliefs about Scandinavian ecosocialism.

A consideration of values, social relations, ideology, and politics is central to reimagining the relationship between ecology and economy (Söderbaum 1999). Even so, it is important to mention that none of these factors operate in isolation from other socio-economic factors or biophysical processes. Addressing the effects of these various intersections requires innovative research methodologies that cut across the divides of natural and social sciences (see, for instance, Swyngedouw 2004). A consideration of the relationship between the political economy of institutions and environmental change opens up productive opportunities for research and scholarship, including for those interested in the emerging agenda of urban sustainability (Elmqvist *et al.* 2013). Ecological economists are best placed to examine how socio-economic and political factors mediate the framing, design, and implementation of policies and institutions meant to foster socially just environmental protection efforts.

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