Can Liberal Democracies Address Transnational Environmental Problems?

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Current and possible future impacts of climate change and environmental degradation are well-documented. Nevertheless, so far liberal-democratic systems have proven themselves unable to deal with these issues. It has consequently been argued that liberal-democratic systems need to be replaced, and two opposed alternatives have been advocated: authoritarianism and more radical forms of democracy. This essay will attempt to demonstrate that while the latter option is morally desirable and would indeed deal with twenty-first century transnational environmental problems more effectively, its implementation will most likely require great lengths of time — a resource lacking for urgent environmental issues. Instead, efforts should concentrate on reforming liberal democracies in order to enhance representation, justice, adaptive capacity and control over markets. Such reforms might, in the future, lead to more radical forms of democracy. The nature and future consequences of transnational environmental problems in relation to liberal-democratic political systems' shortcomings will firstly be explained. Then, alternatives and their benefits and limits will be introduced. Finally, liberal-democratic systems' potential for adaptation in the face of contemporary environmental problems will be discussed.

Liberal democracies' shortcomings in relation to transnational environmental problems

Addressing environmental problems necessarily entails the effective management of common resources such as the ozone layer, oceans, or unsalted water resources; as transnational problems, long-term international goals and planning have to be established. The level of ambition of mitigation and adaptation policies worldwide will determine whether the world will face dangerous but manageable or more catastrophic impacts. Without additional efforts to constrain emissions, the IPCC (2013, p. 20) estimates that by the end of the century, global mean surface temperature will increase from 3.7°C to 4.8°C relatively to 1850-1900 temperatures. Meanwhile, it states that limiting warming below a 2°C increase, that is at levels substantially less risky for humans and non-humans' livelihoods, would require "substantial emissions reductions over the next few decades and near zero emissions of CO2 and other long-lived greenhouse gases by the end of the century" (IPCC 2013, pp. 14-20). Despite evidences documenting the necessity to act fast, global emissions have risen by three percent per year since 2000 (Gough 2015, p. 445). Beeson (2010, p. 283) states that "the only issue that remains in doubt is the nature of the response to this unfolding crisis". Indeed, while predictions about natural phenomena cannot be totally precise; economic, political, social and cultural changes are the main uncertainties that could drastically modify, in one way or the other, the future impacts of climate change (O'Brien et al. 2009, p. 6).

Current liberal-democratic systems possess several shortcomings that impede on their ability to effectively respond to transnational environmental problems. Firstly, liberalism's strong commitment to individualism works against solving long-term problems requiring the advocacy of the generalizable interests of both human and non-human species (Eckersley 1995, p. 170). Indeed, individualism currently promotes the short-term, self-interested goals of humans alone, and as Barns (1995, p. 102) argues it also eschews "any shared normative vision beyond the maintenance of personal and property rights". Consequently, during elections, voters' aggregate preferences represent the sum of personal interests rather than the expression of common desires.

Short cycles of competitive elections are linked to this issue and represent a second shortcoming. These short cycles

lead politicians to concentrate on scoring high in polls and thereby to focus on easily-fixable issues while downplaying the ones requiring more time and courage at the possible expense of popularity, such as climate change mitigation. The faith in technology and market mechanisms, according to Alexander (2016, p. 4), derives from their unquestioning of neither affluent lifestyles nor modes of development, which makes these solutions easy to implement for politicians seeking electoral approval. Moreover, politicians tend to adopt a "wait and see" attitude towards uncertainties and complexities (Eckersley 1995, p. 170), which further prevent ambitious action.

Thirdly, some democratic processes are rendered undemocratic as powerful actors often have more influence than the general population. In the realm of environmental politics, these actors are, *inter alia*, fossil fuel companies or large multinationals, whose economic interests are inherently opposed to environmental protection. Current liberal-democratic systems, by promoting "politics of getting", favour well-resourced, well-organised and well-located organisations over others, including community environmental groups (Eckersley 1995, p. 170). The fear of "capital flight" is also used by corporation to influence domestic policy-making (Alexander 2016, p. 4).

Lastly, neoliberalism's promotion of the market as the organising principle for all social, political and economic decisions (Giroux 2005, p. 2), coupled with individualism and property rights, greatly participates in liberal democracies' inability to address environmental problems. Sustainable development, as conceived by the international community, affirms that both environmental and economic growth goals can be simultaneously pursued, nonetheless it appears that the latter is heavily prioritised over the former. Oels (2005, p. 192) compared the two last types of governmentality identified by Foucault, liberalism and neoliberalism. The shift to neoliberalism led to a shift in governmental objectives from guaranteeing "the effective working of markets by regulation while respecting the 'natural' laws of the economy" to establishing markets as "the organising principle for the state", a shift from seeing the civil society as being a domain of needs to being entrepreneurs of themselves, from welfare state economics to competition state, and from a formation of individual identity as "'free' with rights and interests" to "'calculating' individual entrepreneur of oneself" (ibid). This comparison highlights the fact that neoliberalism greatly reinforces the influence of the economy and markets on the state and on individuals to the obvious detriment of the natural world. The major conclusion deriving from these identified shortcomings is that liberalism became more extreme and appears to be taking over democratic processes, which undermines the articulation of the public good in terms of environmental sustainability.

The potential of alternative political systems

As a result of identifying such barriers to the pursuit of environmental protection and climate change mitigation and adaptation, alternative political systems have been advocated. Authoritarianism would ease the two-level game of international negotiations because citizens' approval would not be needed, thereby policies could be more ambitious and could be implemented faster. This would be a significant advantage because environmental treaties' benefits are abstract and require measures involving politically unpopular and more immediate such as plant closing, job losses or new taxes (Starkey et al. 2010, p. 15). However, authoritarian rule leaves no power to citizens or independent agencies to ensure the government is taking appropriate measures, and the possibility exist that non-elite citizens will be left behind in case of great crisis. Beeson (2010, pp. 276-289) argues that the consequences of population expansion, economic development and the associated environmental degradation will increase the likelihood of authoritarian rule resurgence in East Asian countries with limited state capacity and concludes that "good authoritarianism", that is where environmentally unsustainable behaviour is forbidden, may become both justifiable and essential for humanity's survival in "anything approaching a civilised form". This is a pessimistic view of the international community's potential to respond to environmental crisis, and an optimistic view of authoritarian regimes' potential. Indeed, a multivariate statistical analysis comparing current liberal democracies and autocracies' performance on sustainability indicators concluded that stable autocracies perform worse on strong sustainability, measured by footprint, than stable core democracies (Ward 2008, pp. 386-405). While establishing "good authoritarianism" seems very difficult to implement, Giroux (2005, p. 4) has argued that authoritarianism is "marching forward" in contemporary neoliberal societies with "a notion of national security based on fear, surveillance, and control rather than a vibrant culture of shared responsibility and critical questioning".

Most green theorists advocate more direct forms of democracy as better alternatives to current liberal-democratic

systems (Eckersley 1995, p. 172). Alexander (2016, p. 1) argues that the liberal-democratic narrow conception of democracy, which mostly consist in voting, is dangerous because governance is not by the people, and increasingly not for the people either. Radical democracy is seen as more desirable because its underpinnings, that is rich and participative public discourse, inclusion of all group differences within the public domain, renewal of community life enabling strong moral commitment with respect for difference, and peaceable dialogue between rival versions of the common good, are similar to the ethics needed to effectively respond to climate change (Barns 1995, pp. 101-103). Agonistic public spaces would indeed help to move beyond the exclusionary logic and technocratic elitism of neoliberalism and thereby promote emancipation (Springer 2011, p. 525). In a study examining the potential of participatory processes in responding to climate change risks in the United Kingdom, Few et al. (2007, pp. 46-56) argued that while genuine and open participatory processes are useful when defining overall societal priorities, galvanising broad-based deliberation, or for adaptation to a problem which already has a tangible impact on societies and the environment, anticipatory adaptation is unlikely to succeed. It was thereby concluded that simplistic polarizations between managerialism and deliberative procedures should be avoided. Implementing radical forms of democracy would require an extremely broad public support and activism, and would take a long time to implement. Thereby, even though such system is ideologically and morally desirable, current transnational environmental problems require drastic actions to be undertaken within the next few decades, which does not leave enough time for the education, normative shift, political activism and legal changes that radical democracy's implementation would require.

Liberal democracies' potential for adaptation

Liberal-democratic systems, to better address contemporary transnational environmental problems, need to be significantly reformed. Besides managing common resources and reducing greenhouse gas emissions, environmental problems are also about what humans do to their fellow humans, especially as such issues will disproportionately impact poor nations, minority groups and future generations (O'Brien et al. 2009, p. 5). Thereby, implementing social justice measures is a necessary step to ensure that transnational environmental problems do not exacerbate existing inequalities. While this has been advocated for by environmental political parties and activist groups with some repercussions in policy-making, governmental responses are reactive rather than anticipatory (Eckersley 1995, pp. 169-170). Such advocacy appears, nonetheless, the best channel through with liberal democracies can be reformed. O'Brien et al. (2009, pp. 6-11) call for the creation of a new resilient social contract that addresses the structural factors encouraging the environment's subordination to economic and political goals and interests. Such social contract will need to be adaptive, that is able to handle changing information, multiple types of knowledge and uncertainty, must uphold principles of both distributive and procedural justice, and foster both diversity and social learning. In this process, local, regional and international actors should be involved. Achieving such representative, just and adaptive social contracts in liberal democracies will require, at least, the following changes.

First, neoliberalism will need to be replaced by a more regulated form of capitalism, thus allowing governments to regain agency over market mechanisms. The growing worldwide challenge to neoliberalism is an amorphous resistance (Giroux 2005, p. 3) that exposes the inconsistencies of this ideology's paradigm with the scientific and social realities of climate change. While de-growth or post-growth are, for Gough (2015, pp. 444-448), "politically impossible", growth could eventually become green if radical political change encompassing both production and consumption policies occurs. Such policies could also avoid the sacrifice of equity and social welfare to mitigation. Green growth is a contested academic topic; however, it appears clear that a relatively strongly regulated capitalism is a first and necessary step in addressing transnational environmental problems alongside social justice goals.

Second, political donations and corporate lobbying needs to be further regulated to foster equality in representative democratic systems. Such reforms would increase citizens' trust in their government, and the universal benefits deriving from environmental protection will increasingly be prioritised against corporate interest. Blind (2006, pp. 8-11), in a report written for the 7th Global Forum on Reinventing Government, shares the findings that the worldwide decline in public trust in governments and political institutions is linked to citizens' perceptions of their government's ability to handle economic challenges, which is complicated by globalisation processes, as well as to corruption. The latter has been identified as "one of the most important" factors contributing to declining trust in government in both

the developed and developing world (ibid). The challenges of globalisation, for instance competitive pressures, growing inequality, and increasing numbers of marginalised people in both developed and developing nations, are inextricably linked to neoliberal policies. Both the first and second recommendations made in this essay have the potential to restore trust in liberal-democratic systems and shift governmental actions toward being more public-good oriented and environmentally-friendly.

Third, political and environmental education should be enhanced to further citizens' understanding of the risks associated with environmental inaction and gain the potential to become active actors in democratic processes. For Giroux (2005, p. 3), citizens would greatly benefit from learning skills enabling them to perform as autonomous political agents. It moreover appears essential that communities understand the sacrifices necessary in the short-term to avoid long-term risks and harm. Alongside the two first recommendations, such education and dialogue could shift citizens' focus from extreme individualism to a common formulation of interests. In turn, governments could be held accountable by these active citizens and pressured to commit to greater emissions reduction targets in forthcoming international summits. While the current system allows inputs from below to a relatively small extent, ordinary citizens' potential in redesigning a better society is enormous due to their political legitimacy and the easily identifiable universal benefits associated with designing a more sustainable future.

Conclusion

Liberal-democratic systems, due to several significant shortcomings, will not be capable of addressing contemporary transnational environmental problems unless significant reforms are undertaken. These should at least include a return to a more regulated form of capitalism, reforms in the corporate lobbying and donation systems, and broad education policies to enhance citizens' understanding of, and involvement in, democratic processes.

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