

# ECOLOGICAL MODERNISATION AND THE CHALLENGE TO DEMOCRACY

By Ruth Lightbody

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**T**o environmentalists, the contemporary liberal democratic state still looks like an ecological failure.

Green issues are rarely prioritised within national or global politics, as self interest still dominates - meaning environmental aims often take a backseat to the goals of economic wealth and industrial modernisation. Consequently, many environmentalists have argued that liberal democratic states cannot achieve environmental sustainability. In contrast, this article highlights the importance of working within the current system of liberal democracy in order to improve ecological practice. The article suggests that ecological modernisation (EM) offers the means of 'taming' capitalism and is best suited to working from within a liberal democratic state. In order to encapsulate the potential of EM, methods of deliberative democracy must also be utilized, as this article finds that they can counter the disadvantages of liberal

democracy, identified by environmentalists.

## **Liberal Democracy**

Liberal democracy has been accused, by environmental scholars and others, of being incompatible with green issues. This is due to economic growth; the pursuit of private interest, and the social injustice that liberal societies promote. Due to the presence of capitalism, liberal democracies have a major part of their economy conducted by individuals or privately owned firms operating to gain profit. The increasing consumption and production sector, familiar to developed liberal states is placing unsustainable pressure on the world's finite resources. Consequently calls have been made by environmentalists to place limitations on the continuous industrial and modernisation processes occurring in liberal democratic capitalist states, but many argue that democratic components



of liberal democratic states are too weak and ineffectual to achieve this.

With limited levels of access to democracy open to the public, citizens are pulled between the contrary forces of individual freedom and the common good. Freedom of choice, although core to the liberal ideal, is often detrimental to the environment. What is attractive for the individual does not necessarily work toward the common good. This is to some extent because environmentally good practice is often expensive and inconvenient. Social choice is instead, calculated by pre-determined self interest rather than through discussion and understanding. More often than not, people are uneducated regarding the impact of their actions, or they feel they themselves are powerless to make a difference due to social exclusions surrounding the democratic process.

Centralised governments and nation states make decisions regarding local matters and international issues but the direct impact of these actions is rarely felt by the decision makers. Furthermore, those who make decisions regarding environmental policies are arguably under qualified. It has been suggested that the decision-making process should include experts in the field, but also those who are affected by the decisions. Due to these fundamental failings, many environmentalists argue that liberal democracy and sustainability are incompatible. However, others suggest that these flaws could be remedied if environmental issues were open to public discussion and deliberation. Indeed, deliberative democracy, which places public discussion central to decision-making, has evolved in

response to the failings of liberal democracy.

### **EM and Democracy**

So in what form can the environmental movement attempt to tame capitalist liberal democracy? EM offers many adjustments which are viable for industrialised nations to adopt with little impact to their economy; which is undoubtedly a benefit in today's economic climate. Furthermore, EM can be initiated without a massive overhaul of political and social infrastructures which makes it more obtainable, and therefore less utopian, than some of the more radical alternatives advocated by green theorists. Instead, EM theorists propose the possibilities of further development of capitalist liberal democracy through means of political, social and economic modernisation in order to tackle ecological issues. Economists argue that an 'equilibrium' could be sought which would produce a 'positive sum' game as opposed to the existing 'negative or zero sum' game. This means that environmental solutions need not impede on economic growth and the lifestyle of people. However, EM can best achieve these aims if combined with deliberative democracy.

The central normative claim of deliberative democracy is that political decision-making should be 'talk-centric' rather than 'vote-centric', although this does not necessarily rule out voting. Instead the 'give and take' of rational argument between a wide variety of participants, in a deliberative setting, should facilitate collective decision-making. This can include methods such as; citizen's juries, public hearings and mini-publics. Deliberative democrats



believe that the ability to discuss issues freely and on an equal footing is necessary to cultivate and develop ideas. Citizens will be free to communicate their own ideas while being challenged by conflicting perspectives and alternative opinions. Through this, individuals will be able to acknowledge their own shortcomings and the fallibility of their own perspectives and judgments. The strength of this reflection is that it creates an enlarged mentality which increases respect between fellow citizens and encourages a greater openness to others points of view. The surge of interest on this subject from a green perspective highlights the dissatisfaction with the current system.

Ecological modernisation comes in two forms: weak and strong. Weak, or 'techno corporatist', EM theorists believes market mechanisms and technological innovation are sufficient solutions to ecological degradation. Weak EM promotes modernisation and innovation as key to the future, citing technological advancements as the answer to sustainability by achieving effective structures of production. This theory has been heavily criticised for invoking a system that can only be adopted by developed, industrialised and rich countries, which applies entirely technocratic solutions to environmental issues and fails to tackle social issues. For the purpose of this article, due to these insurmountable deficiencies of weak EM I will be concentrating solely on strong EM.

Strong or 'reflexive' EM is a more adaptable and realistic form of EM. It is agreed that technical innovation and economic growth is necessary but not

sufficient for curbing environmental degradation. Instead, fundamental structural changes to the political and economic systems are needed. Political structural changes must be implemented, such as reflexivity and democratisation of policy making, in order to achieve a sustainable environment. This can be achieved in a number of ways but importantly, deliberative democracy can contribute significantly.

First, policy development can promote environmental protection while encouraging innovation and further research. Systemic realisation of EM requires a proactive, interventionist state supporting a well-developed culture of environmental policy innovation. Significant public investment and subsidies are needed in order to achieve economic benefits and environmental sustainability. This includes further research as well as greater understanding of what policies are trying to achieve.

Deliberative democratic methods could offer a means in which to achieve constructive discussion, and provide a sphere where these EM targets can be set out. This can be done through meetings of experts and lay citizens in order to establish the issues that are closest to people's hearts, but also to swap ideas and innovations between nation states. Some EM theorists have suggested standardising global ecological policy and exchanging technological advancements between countries. In today's globalised economy, nations must remain competitive and governments are under pressure to 'keep up' with global leaders. This competitive edge provides



the necessary urgency for new policy initiatives. Furthermore, it makes it imperative for governments to provide the funds for research and development in the ecological field, or run the risk of being left behind. EM proposes that more will be achieved if new advancements are shared through open and transparent means of communication, between nations, which is where deliberative democracy can contribute. This in turn can assist developing countries in becoming competitive in today's market without causing the same ecological destruction as the current industrialised countries have done and, in many ways, continue to do.

The second goal of EM theory is the promotion of political modernisation, through which a new strategy of state organised reflexivity will be achieved. Strong policy sectors will enable a reflexive use of environmental information in policy development and implementation. This would mean environmental policy can shift and adapt to counter negative side effects or anticipate outcomes. This means that the state can progress from 'traditional' to 'modern' society while monitoring and controlling the means and not just the ends. Governments are required to reshape, steer and set targets but will ultimately allow experts to decide how best to achieve these targets themselves. Experts will be ready to advise on issues but to also review decisions at later dates to ensure the policy that is made is the right one.

The reflexivity that effective deliberation initiates is said to improve the epistemic value of democracy because it draws from a broad information base. Decisions regarding policy changes, as well as the

best action to deter pollutants and degradation must be considered not just by economists, but by politicians, environmentalists, moralists, agriculturalists, and affected lay citizens. Deliberation is vital in this instance due to its ability to encourage reflection and feedback on potentially damaging practices. The review stage of the decision-making process can create a system where governments are not penalised for changing its mind and following a different course, post deliberation.

A third key goal of EM includes internalising costs of ecological damage. This encompasses economic modernisation and requires changing tax systems as well as incorporating more experts into policy making decisions. Monetary accountability would be engineered by internalising existing external costs, such as pollution and environmental destruction. This would be done through taxes or penalties; a system which has already been infiltrated into policy making in many countries in the EU in the form of 'green taxes'.

By attaching a monetary value to products, actions and choices, consumers and industries are more aware of the environmental implications of their behaviour and are thus more likely to act in a greener fashion. This would encapsulate the cost/benefit analysis in a way that people and businesses could relate to. Degradation of the environment must be seen as negative for economic growth; not just a side effect of it. The responsibility of setting taxes obviously falls to individual governments but can be deliberated over at national and transnational levels. The incorporation of umbrella politics, which would hold



entire countries accountable for offences such as environmental destruction, can be improved by globalised deliberation. Greater levels of integration and consensus between nations will undoubtedly lead to less conflict and competition.

However, the danger of wide scale deliberation is its inability to respond to pressing issues or abide by an efficient decision-making process. This is a problem, as environmentalists will agree; time is short in terms of environmental issues. Therefore it is beneficial to have a representative government that is willing to set the agenda; make tough decisions and implement the policies needed to tackle environmental instability. It is invaluable for citizens to be able to interact directly with governments and be involved with the policy formation process, but the efficiency of such a system is unfeasible. Ultimately, governments are essential for steering ecological and economic decisions and must be responsible for taking action and making decisions. In this way they can be held accountable and they can respond to a wide variety of opinions. To this end, transparency is of vital importance, as it must be understood that decisions being made at supranational levels bear some resemblance to the wishes of the people of the nation state. This is why deliberative methods are vital at all levels, but should be incorporated within a liberal democratic system, rather than seen as a replacement of it.

### **Conclusion**

In its current state, liberal democracy can be considered incompatible with the needs of the planet. The promotion of economic growth and the continued

modernisation process is unsustainable. Liberal democracy promotes a system where there are few incentives for citizens or governments to prioritise the environment over the economy. However, the institutionalisation of EM would introduce significant changes to these processes without excessively disrupting economic growth and individual's lives. EM offers an adaptable and reflexive form of democratic transformation which prioritises the environment and uses innovative measures to control the environmentally damaging practices of capitalism.

While EM's reflexive qualities can be used to monitor the environmental and economic progress of ecologically modernising policies and initiatives, deliberative democracy can be employed by providing an inclusive setting where lay citizens, experts and government officials can come together and discuss policy and decision making. The moralising effect of deliberation, due to the need to justify ones opinions, will work well with ecological goals. Yet, deliberation should be used as a tool or resource for democracy rather than something to replace it. Working within the current form of democracy means these changes can be implemented without delay and is the most realistic way to further environmental aims. Deliberation, in conjunction with EM, offers some exciting possibilities which propose both innovative and pragmatic solutions in the challenge to tame capitalism's unsustainable impact on the environment.

### **Note:**

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