ENVIRONMENTALISM FOR DEMOCRACY:
CATALYST OR INHIBITOR?

By James Wong

Does environmentalism strengthen or weaken democracy? This question is worth pondering for two reasons. First, in contemporary democracies, the environment has always been a salient issue on the political agenda. Second, in a democratic process, people are supposed to remain free to prioritise values other than the environment.

Think about cases in which people support the building of additional airport runways (for economic development), or in which they reject the ban on plastic shopping bags (for convenience or maintaining the status quo). Therefore, democracy can, in principle, deliver decisions which are contrary to environmentalism, and it appears that upholding environmentalism requires us to sacrifice democracy.

Putting democracy and environmentalism together

The above assertion is correct insofar as democracy and environmentalism can *never* be compatible, and this ultimately depends on how we understand both concepts. Despite its many definitions, ⟫⟫

democracy is widely recognised as a procedure for collective decision-making. Similarly to a computer system, a decision procedure consists of three components – input, process and output. Minimally, democracy requires that (1) such a procedure accepts all logically possible individual opinions as inputs (or 'pluralism'); and that (2) these inputs be processed by a mechanism which does not overrule any consensus among individuals (or 'consensus preservation').

Arguably, the two conditions are necessary for democracy. 'Pluralism' realises the principle of democratic inclusiveness, where no input should be rejected from consideration unless they are self-contradictory (or they are themselves logically inconsistent). 'Consensus preservation', on the other hand, specifies that democracy should *at least* respect and preserve any unanimous opinions. Suppose a group of council members who are to decide democratically whether plastic shopping bags should be banned. If *all* of them accept the ban, then such acceptance follows for the collective decision. Conversely, if *all* of them reject the ban, then the collective decision is rejection instead.

Likewise, no matter how environmentalism may be defined, essentially it requires that the protection of the environment be prioritised. This implies that certain human activities, such as those which are detrimental to the environment, must be restricted in order to achieve the desired goal of environmental protection. For example, if consuming plastic bags endangers the environment, then, generally speaking,

such behaviour is not considered justified from the perspective of environmentalism.

What does environmentalism mean for collective decision-making? One straight-forward answer is that it constrains the range of decision *outputs* such that alternatives which are detrimental to the environment should not be included. For example, if building additional airport runways creates tremendous pollutions and contributes significantly to carbon emissions (as a result of increased air traffic), then, according to environmentalism, this policy should not be accepted as a desirable output. In other words, environmentalism represents the condition that decision outputs should be green (or 'green decisions').

It is not difficult to think of a situation in which environmentalism (in the above sense) is inconsistent with democracy. Suppose, according to environmentalism, that plastic bags should be banned. Suppose also that a group of decision-makers unanimously agree *not* to ban plastic bags. If democracy requires both the conditions of 'pluralism' and 'consensus preservation', then, in this case, the condition of 'green decisions' cannot be met. This is because, by 'pluralism', the opinions of all decision-makers are accepted as valid inputs into the democratic process; and by 'consensus preservation', since all decision-makers choose not to ban plastic bags, the same alternative is also collectively chosen. Therefore, the collective decision will be rejecting the ban, but this contradicts the condition of 'green outcomes'.

Modifying democracy for environmentalism

Here, we notice that democracy does not always deliver decision outputs, such as electoral results and policy outcomes, which are consistent with environmentalism. In order to ensure that environmentalism is realised in collective decisions, it is necessary that we modify the above, despite this minimal conception of democracy. This can be achieved by relaxing either the condition of 'pluralism' or 'consensus preservation'.

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First proposal: Relaxing 'pluralism'

There are generally two approaches to relaxing 'pluralism'. The first one is 'eco-filtering', meaning that any individual opinions which are inconsistent with environmentalism ('non-green opinions') are rejected from the outset, or filtered away, such that they cannot enter the decision-making process as inputs. In this way, all remaining individual opinions are consistent with environmentalism ('green opinions'), and hence collective decisions will not be contrary to environmentalism. 'Eco-filtering' can be justified on the grounds of many normative theories, such as eco-centrism and ethical extensionism as in environmental ethics.

Consider a group of ten council members deciding whether or not to ban plastic bags. If there are respectively four and six members who reject and accept the ban, then, by 'eco-filtering', the opinions of those four members will be dismissed such that only the opinions of the other six members will be accepted as inputs. As a result, the collective decision must be accepting the ban, which is consistent with environmentalism. Yet, certain individual opinions have to be excluded, which violates the condition of 'pluralism'.

The level of democratic inclusiveness is further reduced when there is a majority of members rejecting the ban. For instance, when there are six members rejecting the ban and four members accepting it, 'eco-filtering' will require that the opinions of the majority be dismissed. This does not only infringe 'pluralism' but it is also contrary to our usual understanding of democracy. Such a problem becomes even more salient when all members reject the ban whilst no member accepts the ban. In this way, by 'eco-filtering', all individual opinions are excluded, and hence no collective decision will be produced (not to mention a *green* decision).

The second approach to relaxing 'pluralism' is 'eco-transformation'. As the name implies, it involves a 'transformation' process which turns any individual opinions from non-green to green. Similarly to 'eco-filtering', 'eco-transformation' aims at ensuring that only inputs which are consistent with environmentalism are accepted as inputs for decision-making. This can be achieved by persuading decision-makers to abandon any opinions which

are non-green and to adopt green opinions based on, say, normative grounds which are consistent with environmentalism. A variety of communication mechanisms may be used for this purpose, such as deliberation, education and publicity.

Suppose, originally, all ten council members are sceptical about the ban on plastic bags. After discussions with government officials and environmental groups, they are convinced that the ban is not only justifiable but also feasible and effective, and thus they change their views from rejecting the ban (non-green opinions) to accepting the ban (green opinions). 'Eco-transformation' may also take place when government and/or environmental groups advocate(s) the ban on plastic bags through media and campaigns in the hope of formulating a green discourse which may alter the opinions of the council members.

At first sight, 'eco-transformation' does not compromise democracy since decision-makers are still free to choose whether to take up the green opinions. The council members may or may not change their views after deliberation/education/publicity, but even if none of them are willing to accept the ban, their opinions are in no sense discarded as in 'eco-filtering'. In this case, however, the collective decision is non-green, because 'eco-transformation' is complete only if there are sufficient green opinions as inputs. Therefore, in order to realise environmentalism through 'eco-transformation', several combinations of individual opinions, such as a unanimous rejection of the ban on plastic bags, must not be accepted, unless they are transformed to other combinations with

more green opinions. This hampers the level of democratic inclusiveness.

Second proposal: Relaxing 'consensus preservation'

To relax 'consensus preservation', we modify the way the decision procedure responds to the accepted individual opinions so as to generate green decisions. There are at least two approaches, namely, 'eco-authoritarianism' and 'environmental rights'.

As the name suggests, 'eco-authoritarianism' prescribes and imposes a green alternative as the collective decision, regardless of whether the accepted inputs are green or not. In other words, if it turns out that all accepted individual opinions are non-green, then these opinions will be overruled, and hence the collective decisions will be consistent with environmentalism.

'Eco-authoritarianism' can be achieved by assigning a dictator independent of the original group of decision-makers, and this dictator has the power of superseding any non-green individual opinions with green opinions. For example, if all members of a provincial government unanimously agree to build an additional runway in one of its airports, this combination of democratic inputs may be overturned by an institution which can exercise decision power 'from above' within a hierarchy, such as the national government, and which holds the view that the additional runway should not be built. This is more likely to be realised in autocratic or centralised regimes or organisations.

It is easy to spot a problem for ensuring green decisions through 'eco-authoritarianism'. As seen from the example above, although the non-green opinions of the provincial government members are accepted as inputs, these inputs are eventually disregarded by the decision procedure. This clearly does not satisfy the minimal condition of democratic responsiveness. On the other hand, we may also relax 'consensus preservation' by introducing certain provisions of rights in laws or constitutions, regarded as 'environmental rights'. Unlike 'eco-authoritarianism', 'environmental rights' do not restrict the decision power of decision-makers but the range of collective decisions which are deemed permissible. In this way, no non-green *individual opinions* are overruled, but if these opinions become *collective decisions*, according to 'environmental rights', these decisions will be struck down. Such a notion of rights is often based on the view that all humans are entitled to certain environmental conditions which are fundamental to their well-being and should not be compromised or sacrificed.

'Environmental rights' can be exercised through an independent process which reviews the collective decisions concerned, such as the institution of judicial review in many contemporary democracies. Suppose the provincial government decides to build the additional airport runway. If citizens find this decision inappropriate in the way that the additional runway would infringe the well-being, and hence the fundamental rights, of themselves, they may resort to judicial review in order to turn the decision from non-green to

green. The final result, of course, depends on whether the court judges the runway project to be a violation of 'environmental rights' as in the constitution.

Again, it is not difficult to see that, by biasing towards collective decisions which are consistent with environmentalism, 'environmental rights' do not treat both green and non-green opinions equally. In other words, it fails to satisfy the neutrality requirement of democratic responsiveness – all decision alternatives should be granted equal weighting in the decision-making process.

Conclusion: Environmentalism is weakening democracy

To realise environmentalism in collective decision-making, we need to, at least, ensure that the collective decisions are always consistent with environmentalism or green-ism. However, decision-makers may not be sufficiently 'green-minded' such that their opinions are not in line with environmentalism, and in that case, collective decisions may not be green. Therefore, green decisions can be guaranteed only if we relax the two minimal conditions of democracy, i.e., 'pluralism' and 'consensus preservation'. But such relaxation does come with a price: it either weakens the level of democratic inclusiveness or the degree of democratic responsiveness.

Note:
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