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From Roadblocks To Building Blocks: Developing A Theory For Putting Power In Its Place

Don Alexander

The demand for more local control has frequently been stimulated by communities suddenly facing the imposition of a toxic waste dump close by, or more clearcut logging in their watersheds, for example. Characterized as NIMBY—Not In My Back Yard—reactions, such responses are fully justified, but they often go little beyond the immediate concern. Consequently, communities remain divided in their calls for more local power and no long-term, integrated movement is created.

Don Alexander, a graduate student in the School of Urban and Regional Planning at the University of Waterloo, Ontario and co-chair of the Save The Oak Ridges Moraine (STORM) Coalition, believes that these isolated community actions could, if linked by more general theory, constitute a broader and more effective movement for putting more power in local places.

My own experience in working with citizens’ groups in Ontario has led me to the conclusion that many of us are so busy putting out brushfires, and putting up roadblocks to development, that we never get around to thinking about what a sustainable society might look like, and how we might get there.

To do that we need a theory, and that’s what we haven’t got. A theory should tell us who are our friends and enemies or, to put it a different way, who favors change towards a sustainable society and who opposes it. It should tell us what needs to be changed, and it should tell us how to overcome barriers and take advantage of opportunities.

Friends And Enemies: The “Planetariat” And “Technocracy”

While it was once thought by Karl Marx that the main conflict in society was between workers and bosses, now many recognize that this is too simplistic—that some of the most important movements today are the peace, ecology, feminism, and pro-democracy movements. We have seen a growing together of these movements in what has been called the “green” movement.

Moreover, it’s not just capitalism which is a problem. We have seen how governments and the scientific establishment have their own vested interest in supporting and driving forward the process of “development.” I call this collaboration of business, government and science the “technocracy.” The main goal of technocracy seems to be to dominate nature by taking away all its “intrinsic meaning and value, beauty and mystery” (Donald Worster), and seeking to control it through technology.

“To make peace with nature, society must emulate nature, at least in certain respects. It must become more self-regulating at the community level...”

Karl Marx saw the working class, or proletariat, as the leading agent of social change, and thought it would play a radical role because of its close involvement in the industrial process. I’m suggesting, in contrast with Marx, that the most radical group in society today is the “planetariat,” which is largely outside the process of industrial production. The planetariat is partially in a pre-industrial position, and partially in a post-industrial position.

By pre-industrial, I mean Native peoples engaged in hunting, fishing, trapping, and horticulture. Also included here would be small farmers and fishermen engaged in production on a small scale. Even where the economic activities themselves have been absorbed into the world market economy, aspects of pre-industrial culture and values remain. By post-industrial, I’m referring to the growing importance of the service and professional sectors. This doesn’t make industrial activity any less important, but it does make it less a part of people’s everyday lives. Some have argued that those who are not directly involved in the industrial process—either as workers or managers—tend to be more critical of the
industrial system, even while enjoying certain of its benefits.(1) Marx thought that capitalism would drive the standard of living of the working class down to the point where its members would scarcely be able to survive, and that this would force rebellion. He called this “immiseration.” By contrast, I see the technocracy creating domestication. I use the term in a very specific sense, following Murray Bookchin:

In its own way, our loss of community has been a form of domestication—a condition that lacks meaning and direction.... Like our cattle, poultry, pets, and even crops, we too have lost our wildness in a “pacified” world that is overly administered and highly rationalized [emphasis added].—The Ecology Of Freedom, 1982.

This domestication is of three kinds: of nature (destruction and simplification of ecosystems), of politics (tendency to replace participation with bureaucracies), and of culture (to replace popularly-produced culture with “mass culture” and consumerism). Planetarians (to be defined shortly) often respond to the first kind, but, in so doing, come up against the other two kinds. Farley Mowat has described the conflict between the planetariat and the technocracy as follows:

It is the conflict between those who possess the means and the will to exploit the living world to destruction and those who are banding together in a desperate and last-ditch attempt to prevent the New Juggernaut from trashing our small planet.

If the right side wins, this combat may become known to future generations as the Crusade that Rescued the Earth. If the wrong side wins—there will be no future generations.

The struggle is an unequal one. The Big Battalions belong to and are commanded by some of the most powerful individuals and cabals history ever recorded. Their battle cry is “Progress!” Their arsenals are supplied by Commerce and Industry. Their most fearsome weapon is Technology. Science is their supportive priesthood. Politics is their handmaiden.—Editorial, Recover, (Fall 1990).

The planetariat is a group defined by common values and a common worldview, although these are often not fully spelled out. At its heart are those who have a green or bioregional perspective. On the outer edge are people who are involved in “Not In My Back Yard” (NIMBY) struggles, but who have the potential to become concerned about much bigger issues. As I see it, the planetariat is made up of the following groups (with examples):

Indigenous Cultures:
• The Innu (Labrador);

• The Penan (Malaysia);
• The Yanomami (Brazil).

Folk or Agrarian Cultures:
• residual rural culture in farming communities in Canada, or fishing communities in the Maritimes and Newfoundland;
• peasant cultures in the “Third World” (the “Chipko” movement in India);
• “submerged nations” in Europe (Bretons, Basques, etc.).

"Counter-Cultures:"
• religious minorities (Quakers);
• back-to-the-landers and others (as in the bioregional movement);
• “humanistic intellectuals” (teachers, students) and educated professionals.

What They Have in Common:
• resistance to ecological, political, and cultural domestication;
• resistance to “development;”
• values counter-posed to those of industrialism.

Of crucial importance is the need to build an alliance between the rural sections of the planetariat (which tend to play a major role in front line battles against the destruction of ecosystems), and the urban sections (for instance, sympathetic artists, academics, and environmental activists) who, together with Native peoples, challenge cultural domestication and stress the need for planetary change. In this way, a movement which genuinely “thinks globally” and “acts locally” can be created.

The three kinds of domestication (ecological, political, and cultural) are related. The effort to dominate nature leads to a centralization of power, and a short-circuiting of the democratic process, as the nuclear industry demonstrates. Consumerism (a form of cultural domestication) is the bait that sucks people into supporting the domination of nature:

Under this project of dominating nature, the individual’s power over the natural environment (power realised in the form of wealth, comfort and gratification) increases remarkably, but... some people gain far more power than others.... Where wants and needs are out of self-control, where they cannot be defined and filled by the person and the immediate community, power must gravitate further and further away.(2)

Thus, resisting the values and culture of the technocracy is an integral part of resisting the degradation of nature and the bureaucratization of
politics. Ultimately, the planetariat must go from merely resisting to creating new planetarian institutions. Institutions needing replacement include: capitalism (wage labor and production for profit), statism (bureaucratization of politics and centralization of authority), and scientism (seeing nature as "dead" stuff, along with the belief that issues of fact can be treated separately from issues of value).

What Needs To Be Changed: The "Mode Of Reproduction"

A basic framework for looking at contemporary problems is that every society can be described as a "mode of reproduction." Society is what enables us to be fulfilled materially, culturally, and spiritually, and this process is only sustainable when it happens in a way that is in relative harmony with natural systems. Societies change in their impacts as population and/or per capita consumption grow. Eventually a point is reached where a given mode of reproduction can no longer support human life without threatening the carrying capacity of the region, or indeed the biosphere as a whole. When that stage is reached, new values and institutions (and this includes different ways of making a living)—which jointly comprise a new mode of reproduction—must be sought to replace the old one. It is evident that we have reached this point in our own society.

In this respect, I find the accompanying chart useful in that it shows how the values and institutions of our present society contribute to a specific problem—urban sprawl—and how a different set of values and institutions might alleviate the problem.

Elements of a new mode would include changed attitudes towards nature, people, and self; forms of community and regional self-government—with equality and respect for women—and a synthesis of expert and vernacular knowledge; and a "communitarian" economy using ecologically and socially appropriate technology. The planetariat will potentially play an important role in helping to bring these institutions into existence. It represents a new mode while the technocracy represents the old.

Barriers And Opportunities: Ecological Democracy

There are three principles associated with "ecological democracy." The first is that democracy is essential to achieving peace with the planet. This has a number of parts to it. First of all, ordinary people tend to be more ecologically-minded than politicians and other members of the technocracy. Secondly, if a more ecological society is to be achieved without further victimizing the more vulnerable members of society, it is crucial that such groups be allowed—and indeed encouraged—to
### KEY FEATURES OF SOCIETIES

(Different Parts of the Mode of Reproduction)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VALUES:</th>
<th>PRESENT SOCIETY</th>
<th>AN ECOLOGICAL SOCIETY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Attitudes towards nature</em></td>
<td>ecosystems as “raw land,” as a mere factor in production</td>
<td>seeing nature as a community of which we are only one member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Attitudes toward other people</em></td>
<td>extreme individualism; people have no ethical responsibilities to the community</td>
<td>having responsibility to other people &amp; future generations to use resources (farmland) wisely</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Attitudes toward self</em></td>
<td>happiness equated with having possessions to be consumed in private</td>
<td>self-realization in harmony with others more important than wealth</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### ORGANISATION:

- *Political relations*  
  - gov’t structures only superficially democratic, allowing control by development interests
- *Cultural relations*  
  - dominance of “experts” who hide biases beneath a mantle of objectivity
- *Kinship relations*  
  - isolated nuclear families, each seeking to occupy its own private “castle”

### PRODUCTION:

- *Forms of ownership & management*  
  - private ownership of land—a collective resource— for speculation and profit
  - allocation of land for development by market forces, not to improve eco/social health
- *How resources get distributed*  
  - technologies of transportation and production encourage centralization of economic activity & decentralization of settlement
- *Technologies*  
  - management of land through community and regional land trusts
  - uses to which land is put to be decided in accordance with ecological & social criteria
  - cultivation of “environmentally-friendly” technologies; consideration of total impacts
fight for social justice. Thirdly, only by participating in decision-making and learning how to trade short-term advantages off against long-term consequences will people develop the maturity to live in harmony with nature.

At present, people are encouraged to pursue their own private ends while leaving management of the "common good" to state officials. However, centralized institutions will not succeed in stabilizing humanity's relationship with nature. In addition to having a technocratic mandate, such institutions are limited by notions of the sacredness of private property and the right of individuals to speculate and become rich. A profound change must occur in the structure of people's thinking and values, and in the kind of aspirations they hold for themselves. To make peace with nature, society must emulate nature, at least in certain respects. It must become more self-regulating at the community level—learning to live in balance with regional ecosystems—rather than relying on government to impose "order" from above. However, if we don't opt for a democratic solution to the ecological crisis soon, authoritarian solutions, however unwieldy, will become more necessary and inevitable.

"...decentralizing and democratizing power relationships will not automatically "solve" the ecological crisis."

A second principle of ecological democracy is that humans must include, in their deliberations, a concern for the needs and interests of other members of the life-community. A third principle is that the difference between how the technocracy talks about democracy and how it practices it provides an opening to be taken advantage of. People living in a technocratic society are consistently denied the right to make the decisions which affect their lives and their immediate environments, and this is particularly obvious whenever some unpopular, ecologically damaging "development" project is proposed. But it should be pointed out that decentralizing and democratizing power relationships will not automatically "solve" the ecological crisis. There is nothing inherent in the democratizing process that guarantees conflicting interests will be harmonized, that humans will consider the needs of other species, or that they will be willing to sacrifice present "perks" for long-term sustainability.

Strategic Issues

A number of issues relate to the preconditions for achieving sustainability. The first has to do with the development of a radical consciousness on the part of the planetariat. Three things are needed: radical values, a radical analysis, and a radical vision. As I mentioned earlier, planetarian values are implicitly radical in that they resist and reject "development." However, without an analysis of technocratic institutions, and a vision of how society might be changed, planetarians tend to aim at piecemeal (and, ultimately, ineffectual) reforms. At least, this has been my experience in Ontario. The point of looking at society as a mode of reproduction is that it is not just a few "bad apple" politicians who are at fault, or a few bad laws, it is a whole structure of values and institutions which must be changed.

A second issue pertains to objective things that need to happen before social change will come about. So long as the economy "works," those who are challenging society's values and institutions will continue to remain relatively marginal and ineffective. Only when the system puts people's economic survival at risk will those who lack the planetariat's cultural and ecological perspective begin demanding change.

When the system ceases to "deliver the goods," as it is beginning to do for many individuals currently employed in resource or pollution-intensive industries, it, in effect, violates the "social contract" that has kept many well-paid working people relatively loyal to the system. This creates an opportunity to build alliances between groups which have tended to be unsympathetic to one another, such as Natives, environmentalists, and workers in resource industries, such as the forest products industry.3 No new mode of reproduction will ever come into being until new ways of making a living are found:

People are aware of the social costs of the system, but it is a system that, after all, does deliver the goods along with the costs. In the absence of alternative systems that could deliver the goods without the costs, it is unthinkable to reject this one. Once such alternatives have been firmly established, it will be possible to give resistance and struggle a positive meaning for the many who suffer from the deprivations of the system, but see no way to change it.4

An alliance between workers and the planetariat gives the search for such institutions much greater force.

A big challenge for social change activists is learning how to balance working for immediate reforms with the need to maintain a long-term vision of radical social change. The positions that we take on this issue are related to our views of government.
As long as the state, at whatever level, is the agency that makes decisions about how land will be used, then local citizens' groups have no choice but to try to influence state policy. This is the defensive part of our struggle; it amounts to putting roadblocks in the path of development. This phase shades over into what might be called a transitional phase—proposing and fighting for reforms which help address immediate problems, but which have longer-term consequences, potentially constituting the building blocks of a new society. A third, radical, phase involves educating people about the link between our current mode of reproduction and the planetary crisis, and the need to build a new mode: a new way of relating to ourselves and to nature.

To juggle these different phases requires combining different ways of relating to government. Possible strategies include: attempting to get elected to state positions in order to use them to strengthen grassroots movements and push through needed reforms; developing so-called “co-production” schemes where citizens become directly involved in carrying out government functions (an example of this would be the new Temagami Stewardship Council involving members of the Teme-Augama Anishnabai and representatives of the Ontario provincial government—see Chapter 14), and reducing our dependence on the state and seeking to rebuild our community networks—networks which in the past did a lot of the things that we now expect government to do. I would argue that the planetarian movement needs to do all of these things simultaneously. Previously, Greens have found it difficult to avoid making one strategy (particularly, electoral activity) the be-all and end-all of their work.

Hopefully, as we make breakthroughs in fostering grassroots action for sustainability, we can reflect on the lessons and gain a better understanding of how to move towards a sustainable society.

Endnotes:


(3) Examples of where this is beginning to occur include Earth First! activist Judi Bari’s work in California and Oregon, and the Tin-Wis Coalition being organized in British Columbia.