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**Ecological thought and concern for social
inequalities: indifference, opposition or
convergence?**

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Edwin Zaccai

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to assess key relations between ecological thought and concern for social inequalities. Building on the fact that these relations may be controversial, the analysis will proceed as a fictional trial, introducing two opposite theses, one after the other. In the first section, arguments that tend to see ecological thought as indifferent or detrimental to social equity are presented. The second part, after the prosecution, will conduct the case for the defence: arguments that sustain the idea that ecological objectives reinforce the search for a social equity will be outlined. In both parts, authors belonging to five different clusters of discourse are considered: deep ecology, environmentalism and sustainable development, ecological modernisation, risk and technology management, and finally radical criticism of development (including political ecology). While the situation differs within these different groups of discourses, it appears that the aims of environmental protection and social equity on the whole do not necessarily converge nor diverge, one of the reasons being their disconnected histories. We conclude with a plea and a few propositions towards increased convergence between ecology and social equity.

Keywords:

Equity, Justice, Distribution, Social inequalities, Ecology, Green Thought

Address for correspondence:

Edwin Zaccai
Université Libre de Bruxelles, IGEAT
Visiting scholar at the Land Economy Dept, Cambridge
ezaccai@ulb.ac.be

I. Argument

Trying to describe the connections between ecological thought and issues of social equity is fraught with a certain number of difficulties. First of all, what is *ecological thought*? This paper will consider a set of authors belonging to various clusters of thinking whose work has spanned the past five decades, although it is obviously possible to find earlier precursors (Klinkers *et al.*, 1997, Adams 2001). The first part of this paper outlines these clusters, with special emphasis on their relationship with social equity. However, the latter is no better defined as a concept, for "social justice" is, as "environmental sustainability", a "contested concept" (Dobson 1998, p.5). Indeed quite different theories of justice may be traced (Kymlicka 1999) from which several concepts of *inequalities* would stem. In this brief essay we will connect under this banner issues such as the distribution of advantages and disadvantages within a society, and more generally social differentiation vis-à-vis policy options.

No doubt various authors involved within ecological thought have developed analysis and arguments backing the convergence of social and ecological objectives in many respects. Moreover the political arena would show that a majority of Green parties usually agree with this claim. We shall meet these positions and arguments in the following sections. But on the other hand, there is also ground for criticizing some green priorities or conceptions from the point of view of devoting more attention to social inequalities. This is why we propose here to sketch successively these two narratives, obviously in a much simplified manner, applied to a vast range of ecological discourses.

After presenting the various ecological schools of thought's ties with these issues, we shall thus first group the arguments that would underscore these currents' *failure* to allow sufficiently for social equity. Then we shall proceed to do the same with arguments showing from what perspectives ecological thinking would *promote* social justice. In a nutshell, one could liken this part of the paper to putting ecological thought on trial for observing or failing to uphold social equity, complete with the arguments of the prosecution and defence. Despite this essay's lack of precision, it is motivated precisely by the idea that in the debates surrounding the key theme being covered, one regularly finds a series of arguments about the links between these issues often expressed in a polemical vein. It might than be interesting to

try to reposition them more broadly within conceptual frameworks, even if, as is usual in this type of exercise, several frameworks and approaches are possible, meaning that this essay is no more than a limited attempt to clarify and reconnoitre the issues¹.

II. Variations in ecological thought

For the needs of this talk we shall thus define five different clusters of thought, although we should be very much aware that this involves simplifications, and other configurations (De Roose and Van Parijs 1991; Deleage 1991; Bourg 1996; Guha and Martinez-Alier 1997; Kalof and Satterfield 2005, Dobson 2007), divisions and overlapping between these schools of thought are very likely to occur.

A. *Deep ecology*

The type of ecological thinking known as *deep ecology*, which is primarily of North American extraction (Aldo Leopold, John Muir, Roderick Nash, J. Baird Callicott)², would be the only non-anthropocentric current to be considered here. Given the magnitude of the changes that it advocates for human societies to draw closer to a more biocentric vision of the world, including the conservation of sparsely settled wilderness areas, even policies advocating to reduce the human population, this current offers few practicable policy proposals. Some radical tries to outline equity and justice *interspecies* eventually lead to philosophical contradictions (see Ost 1995; Bourg 1996). Deep ecology nevertheless plays no doubt an inspiring role and can be singled out for its radical statement of the problem of the balance of living species, including humankind, in nature. Although it comprises some vital ethical research, this current does not usually focus on the specific theme of the social equity practical consequences of its proposals.

¹ Although this text contains openings towards a global approach, the references to ecological thinking are primarily Western ones, with special emphasis on literature in the French language. To lighten the bibliography it only all the details when the text refers to a specific book or paper. When the entire work of a scholar is cited as a position in the debate, such as it is the case for Aldo Leopold for instance and many others below, I enclose no such details, and the interested reader will easily find more about these seminal thinkers within broadly available information sources.

² Arne Naess, who introduced the expression in an article in 1973, is a notable exception.

B. Environmentalism and sustainable development

The dominant trend in environmental policy today is to achieve set protection targets on various levels, namely, global, national, and local. These objectives concern the conservation of parts of nature and some of its qualities (e.g., air and water quality standards), but also various aspects of human activity (housing, mobility, etc.). The *environment*, the protection of which is a major demand of Western societies and more and more groups on this planet, is seen concretely as varied and dynamic sets of parameters. This is even more the case of sustainable development, even if, in the constellation that this expression covers (Zaccarà 2002, Smouts, 2005, Hopwood et al. 2005), environmental protection must negotiate with economic and social imperatives more clearly than in the past. Here, the “cannons” of sustainable development put forward in the *Brundtland Report* (1987) formally include the notion of equity and underscore that priority must be given to meeting the needs of the most disadvantaged first. There are also trends beyond nature protection (symbolised by “greenness”)³ which focus on the relationship between "development" (notably consumption) and wellbeing in societies, often reflecting on broad categories such as nations, or "rich" and "poor" countries.

C. Ecological modernisation

A more technological version of sustainable development banks heavily on technological progress to reduce development's environmental impacts. This *ecological modernisation* asserts, somewhat optimistically, that environmental protection is compatible with and even beneficial for the continuation of modernisation (World Business Council for Sustainable Development). Even though institutional adaptations must be made (Spaargaren 1997, Janicke 2008), distribution is expected to be regulated primarily by economic rules. It appears much more adapted to the North countries, that are on the trend of decoupling economic growth and environmental industrial impacts, while poorer countries are more subject to overexploitation of agrarian and forests natural resources.

³ According to Inglehart (1995), the post-materialist influence of lifestyle changes is more important than environmental degradation in motivating ecological concern.

D. Risk and technology management

Rachel Carson's seminal book, *Silent Spring*, (1962) popularised awareness of the hidden impacts of technological progress in society as of the early 1960s with calls for more thorough consideration of the risks that such progress entailed. This current has set the ground for environmentalism (see B. above) but also to such capital notions as the precautionary principle and the Risk Society introduced by Ulrich Beck (1986). Today, a great many investigations and schemes are trying to democratise certain technical developments (Bruno Latour) in an extension of this thinking (Callon et al., 2001). In this cluster of works, society (often Western society) as a whole is often considered, but some aspects also evaluate the distribution of harmful effects and hidden costs amongst specific segments of human actors or groups.

E. Radical criticism of development

Put very simply, at the opposite end of the scale from ecological modernisation we could place a group of – often militant – authors characterised by their radical challenging of “development”. Thinkers with roots in European ecology, such as Ivan Illich, André Gorz, and Edward Goldsmith, have been followed by other authors who are particularly critical of globalisation and the South's proclaimed fate to copy the North's development model (Wolfgang Sachs, Vandana Shiva)⁴. The “degrowth” motto (Serge Latouche) is a recent reactivation of this current. Here, social justice issues are pre-eminent, but the conservation of natural resources, preferably through dimensions that are not entering into markets, also holds great importance⁵. This is the group to which we will also attach here *political ecology* which “sprouted from critical development research, peasant studies, environmental history, cultural ecology, and postcolonial theory” (Robbins 2004, p. XVIII). Political ecology (Martinez-Alier, Tim Forsyth) is particularly interesting for the issue of inequality, because it

⁴ Radical criticism of development can be found in its many aspects in M. Rahnema and V. Bawtree's anthology (1997).

⁵ The already cited book by Guha and Martinez-Alier (1997) documents well a form of environmentalism that arose in the poor populations in the South in reaction to economic changes that were detrimental to them – a theme that has been taken up and amplified by Martinez-Alier (2002). Examples of this type now abound and have been taken up by some environmental NGOs. We can take just one emblematic case, that of oil drilling in Nigeria, and Greenpeace's action against Shell in 1997. I would suggest that several social and environmental themes have been coalescing in activist movements over the last few years - think also of Wangari Maathi winner of the Peace Nobel Prize in 2005 – an orientation of which Guha and Alier's book and the political ecology current were precursors.

underscores the inequalities in the distribution of the benefits and disadvantages of environmental changes⁶. This current moreover may eventually criticise some of the “apoliticalness” of environmentalism that we shall effectively come to in the next section. One may also add to this group the *environmental justice* movements, especially those found in the United States (Robert Bullard), with their strong racial connotation and focus on activism.

F. What about economics ?

In this paper we do not consider the economical dimensions of the different clusters introduced here, but these aspects deserve a few remarks. It has become common to differentiate economical sciences applied to the natural environment between *environmental* economics, and *ecological* economics (Spash 2005). Probably environmental economics would fit in more with ecological modernisation, risk governance, and a part of environmentalism, while ecological economics could irrigate some of the other schools. But the issue here is not to discuss and delineate these somehow tricky divisions. When it comes to the distribution of (environmental) good and bads, be it in their material form, or through any economical impact, many of which hidden, we can expect economical analyses to take place. And indeed, some authors already cited within the above categories are economists. But even if many important work is done in this respect, environmental as well as ecological economics appear often more involved in complex tasks of translating environmental objectives, principles, values into the economy than to focus on the relations between social inequalities and the environment, especially within a given society. Regularly for instance we find the levels of a nation, or a region taken as the dimension of analyse⁷.

⁶ Martinez-Alier (2002) moreover points to this characteristic as being typical of political ecology. Political ecologists “...accept the idea that costs and benefits associated with environmental change are for the most part distributed among actors unequally (which inevitably) reinforces or reduces existing social and economic inequalities ... (which holds) political implications in terms of the altered power of actors in relation to other actors” (Robbins 2004, p. 11. The quote comes from R. Bryant and S. Bailey (1997). See also Adams (2001, pp. 250-284), and, going back farther, various studies by anthropologists, especially those of Johnston (1994).

⁷ For instance a research on the website of the journal "Ecological economics", with keywords such as "equity", "justice", "inequalities", attracts few papers specifically on the matters that we consider here. Often these words are used more as general principles.

III. Environmental protection indifferent (or detrimental) to social equity

Having set the bare bones of the stage, we shall now concentrate on three criticisms of ecology as being indifferent to social inequity, to wit, *naturalism*, *unanimism*, and the *over-representation of the well-off* in this field. Let us look at them in succession and try to circumscribe their scopes.

In deep ecology and in part in environmentalism there is a tendency to focus on humans' *naturalness* and neglect their socio-economic situation. This is the case, for example, when a "carrying capacity" for people is too clearly defined, and especially when it leads influential writers, such as Paul and Ann Ehrlich, to see the demographic growth of the poorest peoples as the supreme threat, without stressing over-consumption by the world's rich countries as a major ecological problem (Ehrlich and Ehrlich, 1968, criticised by Le Bras (1994)). More technically, there is Petrella (1999), who denounces the environmental approaches to water management that are centred around available natural resources without studying the more decisive factors of the conditions of access to this resource. Let us point out, however, that this type of criticism tends to be gradually recognized, if we take the example of the influential official *Millennium Ecosystem Assessment* (2005), which proposes an approach based on ecosystem services and in which access is an inherent given. Additionally, when it comes to the current of technological critique, its sociological background makes it aware of the social construction of risks priorities.

Unanimism, for its part, is omnipresent in the highly publicised warnings to "save the planet". Yet the planet is also one of countless inequalities, one where the "we" of humankind called upon to act together masks, involuntarily or voluntarily, the strategies of players with partially diverging influences and interests. The various currents sketched above nevertheless have variable positions, as we have seen, when it comes to highlighting the oneness of the human species, various players' liabilities for the damage that is caused, and striving to get citizens involved in decision-making. A variation of the criticism that is levelled at unanimism can also be that levelled at its general proposals and "fine sentiments"'s *lack of realism*. Ecological thinking in this case is decried for its lack of ability to make actual changes in social injustice, for one thing.

On another front, it cannot be denied that environmental protection as it is defined today in the dominant global discourse and major economic decisions has been largely the *rich countries'* brainchild. The Rio Conference of 1992, which set the international political foundations of sustainable development, did not challenge northern development patterns; it merely contented itself with asking for adjustments. Some of the solutions advocated by ecological modernisation do not solve the major environmental and development problems in the South. Certain conservation policies can harm their local populations (Forsyth 2003). In the Western countries, the middle and upper classes are over-represented in the “green” constituency (Delwit and Dewaele, 1999; Bozonnet, 2005). Nevertheless, we have seen that the current that is the most radically critical of development – on behalf of those who are forgotten or exploited by development – does not skip the ecological issues, and there are also major green movements in the South.

These three arguments are summarized in Table 1, with their variations within each cluster of ecological thought, based on the text in Section II and III above. Of course, the much reduced space makes it only possible to enter the very key position in each cell, knowing that there is a range of fluctuations and possible exceptions every time.

Table 1: Environmental protection is indifferent (or detrimental) to social equity: 3 arguments discussed along five types of ecological thought

	Dominance of naturalism	Unanimism	Over-representation of the well-off
<i>Deep Ecology</i>	Yes	Yes	Unpopular discourse
<i>Environmentalism and sustainable development</i>	Tendency to focus more on natural constraints than on sociopolitical analysis <i>But</i> Room for articulating social, economic and environmental issues	Yes : Often a "we" discourse	Usually stronger among higher/middle-class and experts
<i>Ecological modernisation</i>	No: Dominance of economic assessments	Yes : Often a "we" discourse	Usually stronger among higher/middle-class and experts. Not relevant for poor countries
<i>Management of risks and technologies</i>	No: Emphasis on the social "construction" of the perception of risks	Yes: Theory of (post-) industrial society as a whole	Distribution of risks within population often poorly studied. <i>But</i> also environmental justice, and use of techniques as mapping of positions
<i>Radical criticism of development</i>	May romanticize the past and agrarian societies	Partly, with a division between rich and poor (people, countries)	No : Voluntary focus on the "losers" of development

IV. Protecting the environment favourable for social justice

In this section we shall analyse, as a counterpoint to the previous section, three arguments based this time on the idea that ecological concerns would result in more social equity, to wit: 1) ignoring environmental protection would *threaten* social equity in some dimensions that are actually underrated; 2) the poorest segments of the population are the most dependent on *common assets*, to which many environmental resources belong; and 3) environmental policies explicitly include *equity objectives*.

First, many ecological thinkers have striven to shed light on unknown aspects of equity as it is commonly taken into account in traditional socio-economic theories and policies. These are the environmental dimensions of *intergenerational* equity and international equity in particular. Some types of environmental degradation stemming from the increasing impacts of human activity – a cause that will not diminish – threaten human welfare through health problems and problems of access to resources, space, and other “environmental services” (without mentioning the ethical value that nature may have for some people). Costs are thus being transferred to future generations, raising issues of intergenerational equity (Dobson, 1999), which is of course one of the hallmarks of sustainable development compared with other types of development. More frequently, cost transfers through environmental impacts occur between groups of people, for instance through exported or delocalised impacts (which are estimated by the ecological footprint, for example).

To understand the second argument, let us consider environmental resources such as water and access to common areas (or “*the commons*”). We see well that keeping these common resources in good condition is advantageous for those who do not have the financial ability to have access to drinking water for a fee or privatised areas⁸. The more or less self-sufficient farmer (an extended part of the population in economically poor countries) depends much more on the quality of his soil or a stable climate than does the owner of economic wealth, whose wealth gives him access to goods from alternative sources if an ecological problem affects a specific place of origin (the same reasoning holds for local fishermen compared with buyers of imported fish)⁹. Moreover, richer countries or groups will have more resources first to prevent environmental disasters and if necessary to cope with the ensuing damage, should they occur. These various arguments, summed up here in a nutshell, back up the idea that protecting specific facets of the environment is proportionately more crucial *for the welfare of disadvantaged groups*, a claim very well documented at global level in the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (2005). Another form of this argument is the idea that if a major ecological reform is not carried out voluntarily (especially when it comes to carbon energy

⁸ Enzensberger’s argument on this subject, in a seminal paper in 1974, merits consideration: Taking a Marxist perspective, he interprets the fact that the bourgeoisie denounced environmental degradation at the time when it deemed that it could no longer escape the deterioration of the commons, whereas such a denunciation had not been made in the 150 years during which industrialisation had also spread pollution far and wide, but without harming this social class at the time (pp. 125-126)

⁹ Subject to the reservation, however, that the fishermen or farmers are involved in setting the standards for what must be preserved. Otherwise, the naturalist criticism mentioned above, where conservation aims can harm local interests, can kick in.

and the climate), the consequences of dramatic changes to come would skew social equity even more, as they will be more brutal (Cochet and Sinai, 2003).

Finally, the third argument is more formal but nevertheless important. Official environmental policies are backed by a set of *principles*, some of which concern social equity. Although notions such as common, public, and general interest and what they entail in terms of being fair are not easy to define in practice, lawmakers allow for elements of equity in taking decisions on controlling pollution and planning land use. Of course, as in all legislation, these objectives determine what is happening on the ground only in part. Still, these aspects are definitely resources (notably, legal resources) that players can use. A certain number of environmental advocates, such as a series of NGOs, rely heavily on them, and the Green parties often make use of them as well in their discourse. It should nevertheless be pointed out that while the use of participation in environmental decision-making procedures can provide an “alarm bell” against excessive pollution or nuisance levels, it does not guarantee *ipso facto* that the decisions will be fair, given the low rates of participation in such procedures that are often seen, their frequent socio-economic biases (relative absence of disadvantaged categories), and even in the case of large mobilizations, the limited range often given to these claims in the final decision.

These three arguments are summarized in Table 2, with their specifications within each cluster of ecological thought, based on the text in Section II and IV above (with as much simplification as for Table 1).

Table 2: Protecting the environment is favorable for social justice : 3 arguments discussed along five types of ecological thought

	Ignoring environmental protection would threaten social equity (intergenerational, international)	The poorest segments of the population are the most dependent on common assets, to which many environmental resources belong	Environmental policies explicitly include equity objectives.
<i>Deep Ecology</i>	Yes: Argument towards respecting the natural "limits"	Argument usually not present	Not practically
<i>Environmentalism and sustainable development</i>	Yes	Yes, when considering developing countries	Yes, formally explicit
<i>Ecological modernisation</i>	Yes, but primarily seen through economical values	Not a concern: Favours technological solutions that may be expensive to the poor	Marginally
<i>Management of risks and technologies</i>	Yes, even if equity as such is not an important issue	Not a concern : Focus on technology impacts (exception: GMOs)	Partially
<i>Radical criticism of development</i>	Yes	Yes	Agree, and consider the situation in this respect as much too weak

V. Conclusions and prospects

If we thus consider the pool of arguments (and thinkers) brought together here, we can conclude that it appears that the aims of environmental protection and social equity on the whole *do not necessarily converge or diverge*. To take a simplistic example, a wealthy person can increase social inequity by consuming some more “green” commodities (a new step in marketing), regardless of government standards (which will eventually be dragged down), and for extended part of its consumption shifting hidden nuisances to less influential groups, be they in his own country or abroad (Zaccaï 2007). This superficial form of ecology was already stigmatised by Alphantery *et al.* (1991) more than fifteen years ago. However, as the

relationships explored above have shown, one can also serve social justice by taking certain ecological problems into account, under certain conditions. The slogan “too poor to be green” does not hold water in many Third World movements working to gain access to agricultural, spatial, and environmental resources, as Guha and Martinez-Alier (1997) assert most critically. Disadvantaged people in wealthy countries can also suffer disproportionately from environmental pollution and nuisances, be it directly or indirectly (air pollution, noise, ...), as studied by the environmental justice school and movement.

Though work has been done in this respect (see a bibliography in (Zaccai et al. 2007)), social equity analysis and environmental policy have not yet explored a "cross-reading" of these themes sufficiently. It seems that in the so-called "three pillars" of sustainable development the relations between the economy and the environment have received much more attention than the environmental-social couple (the economical and social pillars having their special couple histories, prior to sustainable development) (Cornut et al. 2007). Given their disconnected histories (Dobson 1998, Lipietz, 1999; Besset, 2005; Theys, 2007), we should acknowledge that social equity and environmental protection are not concepts that can be made directly linked to each other. Many environmental objectives have no immediate consequences that can be translated directly in equity terms. Moreover, other immediate factors intervene heavily in the equity patterns within a society, economic ones, but also education, health, and other factors, that all legitimately can have urgent demands, because disadvantage groups can also suffer disproportionately from other nuisances and impacts than environmental ones. We also cannot ignore the fact that in the real world, priorities for action can often make some of these objectives contradictory to specific environmental objectives when means are limited.

So, beyond simply reviewing the positions in the field, this paper is a plea for increased *convergence* between ecology and social equity. Achieving such convergence requires more work *i.e.* and more analysis¹⁰. However, maybe above all, it requires *credible socio-ecological projects* that are neither limited to advances in particular environmental branches (generating a certain number of “green jobs”) nor ad-hoc juxtapositions of the achievement of disparate economic, social and ecological objectives, as we are sometimes accustomed to see in some recent versions of sustainable development. Still, the ecological crisis that has been

¹⁰ Even if Boyce’s (2002) documents empirically a somehow optimistic thesis claiming that countries in which democracy is more highly developed would be correlated with greater respect for the environment.

denounced for half a century is now compounded by humankind's rapid entry into the era of economic globalisation, and we have no ready-made models to guide us lastingly towards more equity.

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