

This was one of the best essays ever written for FIR319. Apart from variations of spelling Eckersley there is little to complain about. Hence the outstanding mark. The comments on the essay were “I’m not honestly sure I could ask for any more. You have clearly done all the reading that was asked, thought about it, gone beyond and presented an essay which is rigorous and in terms of academic conventions very, very well presented indeed. You have clearly applied theoreretical ideas to a problematique that you set yourself and then present conlusions which are insightful and useful. Ah yes, what about spelling Eckersley correctly – what did she ever do to you?! Excellent 77%”

CRITICAL THEORY AND SHALLOW ECOLOGICAL THOUGHT: WHY A SHIFT FROM EARLY FRANKFURT SCHOOL CRITICAL THOUGHT TO HABERMASIAN CRITICAL THINKING WILL OFFER A MORE PRACTICAL ECO-POLITICAL FRAMEWORK FOR ECOLOGISTS TO IMPLIMENT PROTECTIVE ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY IN HUMAN SOCIETY.

Greene (1998) argues that industrialisation and rapid population growth have massively increased the scale and intensity natural resource exploitation and environmental degradation. Thus, environmental problems are related to broader political or socio-economic processes, which are increasingly *global*. Here, Greene claims that understanding the causes and impacts of global change are an urgent task for international relations (ibid: 313). Moreover, so too is improving knowledge of how to develop effective responses. Consequently, approaches and concepts within political and international *theory* can contribute substantially to managing the ‘environmental crisis’ as well as ecologists understanding of politics in the social world.

Theory is *essential* here, as Dunn states; “The purpose of political theory is to diagnose practical predicaments and to show us best how to confront them” (1990: 193). Obviously, if political and international *theory* form part of the environmental crisis’s solution, then current and *dominant* trends of thought need to be questioned. Lafferriere and Stoett (1999: 138) claim epistemology (our knowledge base) is central here and argue that orthodox *positivism* limits the ability of theory to move beyond descriptive and regulative analysis into a more normative and phenomenological agenda. Here, a narrow positivistic understanding of global processes, largely built on the emphasis of the states-system, has inadvertently bypassed the *environmental* and

social processes in global politics. Moreover, if positivist epistemology constitutes a 'narrow understanding' of global processes, then it is important to question our own ontology (perceptions of knowledge) in applying international relations theory towards protecting the environment.

For Hayward (1994) and Ekersley (1990, 1992) the development of critical theory by the Frankfurt School is significant to ecology and needs to be addressed prior to Habermasian revisions of it. Theorists such as Adorno, Horkheimer and Marcuse criticised orthodox Marxism, which perpetuates a belief in industrial growth and the mastery of nature as progress, which emancipates humanity from unnecessary labour. It is precisely the domination of *instrumental rationality* on social life, at the expense of the individual, which critical theorists identify as the basis of the relationship between man and the domination of science on the natural world, at the environment's expense. Moreover, critical theory remains committed to early Marxian notions of emancipation. Here, instrumental rationality is partly embedded in the unnecessary pursuit of over production in capitalist society for profit and over consumption, which also resonates to ecological thinking as both humans and nature need to be freed from the negative effects of modern industrial society.

In a similar vein, ecological thought has confronted dominant Baconian and Cartesian perceptions of *humankind* and nature, especially notions of the scientific revolution, where social and spiritual utopianism gradually changed to the conquest of, and dominion over, the natural world through modern science. According to Hovden (1998), the ideological shift of the human-nature relationship saw reverential rationality turn to the *instrumental rationality* of Enlightenment at the expense of the natural world, which was perceived as a human tool and devoid of all *intrinsic* value. Here, critical theory, in questioning the instrumental rationality in the social and political sciences, may claim some relationship to ecological thought (Lafferriere and Stoett 1999).

Critical theory can now “target positivist assumptions towards science based epistemology” (Lafferriere and Stoett 1999: 138). Positivism bases our rationality in anthropocentric (human centred) science, “from an instrumental view, nature has no meaning in itself; rather its meaning comes from our instrumental apprehension of it” (Dobson 1993: 193). Therefore, a different sort of reason is required if the qualitative form of life that nature brings should not be over shadowed or destroyed by further industrialisation, resource exploitation and higher levels of consumption in human society. Marcuse argued, in a similar vein to many ecologists’ notions of sustainability, that it is qualitative change that should “presuppose a quantitative change in our advanced standard of living, namely a reduction of over-development” (Marcuse 1964: 242). Here, humankind needs to develop an ontological understanding of our basic needs if a qualitative life is to be sustained. Marcuse sees the need for rational human beings to be partly *aesthetic* as it can “free nature from brutality only as post technological rationality, in which technology is itself the instrumentality of pacification, [the] organism of the “art of life” (ibid: 24).

Here, Dobson contends “Green politics is precisely about mobilising the resources of Enlightenment- particularly technological ones- to ameliorate the ugly side of industrial progress: acid rain, global warming and holes in the ozone layer” (1993: 207). Although technology is mobilised to ameliorate the damage that technological progress has caused, a ‘techno-fix’ is not the only answer as it amounts to an evasion of *political responsibility*. This relates to Greene’s argument earlier that the environmental problems we confront are related to broader social and political issues globally.

Despite the potential insights critical theory offers ecological thought, Eckersly (1990, 1992) explicitly blames Habermas’s revisions of earlier critical theorists for dampening its impact on the ecological movement. This is because Habermasian ethics are completely anthropocentric: only humans can participate in practical discourse because it involves both linguistic competence and a degree of reflection on commutative practices which only rational beings (humans) would seem capable (Hayward 1994: 45). Whereas Marcuse emphasises the *intrinsic value* of nature in

understanding rationality, Habermas' revisions sought to "prevent our social relationships from becoming like our relationships with the natural world," which can only be constituted in objective natural science (cited in Hayward 1994: 45). Habermas also took issue with Marcuse, claiming that it is logically impossible to imagine a *new* science could be developed that will overcome the manipulative and domineering attitude towards nature in modern science (Eckersley 1992).

Eckersley argues this extremely anthropocentric side of Habermasian critical theory illustrates the divisions in ecological thought, especially the debate on whether to solve environmental problems by utilising regenerative anthropocentrism (environmentalism), or with a more radical ecocentrism. This basically constitutes the shallow/deep debate in ecological thought (Dobson, 1990, 1995). Eckersley offers a deep ecological critique of Habermas as there is no guarantee that he would grant any more value to the non-human world by dividing *intrinsic* human relationships from *instrumental* human-nature relationships (1990, 1992). A central argument here is that unless we move from an "anthropocentric (human centred) to an ecocentric (earth-centred) conception of our place in the evolutionary drama then we not only impoverish our own life-world but will also see to the extinction of countless other species" (1990: 739). Naess (1989) grounds deep ecology's environmental ethic in the notion of 'Self', with a capital 'S', which encompasses both the individual being and the environment they inhabit. Furthermore, given the implications of ecological interdependence, the individual's surroundings extend the principle of "Self" to the entire universe. Here, unlike Habermasian thinking, *subjective* human beings cannot perceive the natural world as *external* and *objective* as it embodies our wider intrinsic ecological existence of being.

However, anthropocentrism is central to human society, especially our *human* ontology. This is similar to the anthropocentric approach taken in *shallow* eco-philosophy. As Fox points out, many eco-philosophers' adopt the view that "humans are valuable of and in themselves, but the non-human world is valuable only insofar as it is of value *to* humans" (1990:149). Thus, the non-human world is considered valuable only as it can serve *human* ends. However, this does not mean that the natural world is not important *to* humans. Despite the difference between intrinsic and

instrumental value, humans survive within the *external* environment, and therefore have to consider the effects environmental degradation and finite resources have on *themselves*. For Habermas, the ecological crisis can be “a practical catalyst for reflection on how the ways in which we currently assault nature is leading to a more and more frustrating and self destructive form of life” (cited in Hayward 1994: 45).

Unlike Naess’s deep ecology, it is humanity, not necessarily nature, which comes first and can provide a realistic reason for championing ecology within *human* society. Obviously, it is within *humanity’s interests* to integrate ecological concerns into *our* political institutions and policies. It is with the reference to *human interests* that anthropocentrism remains essential in both theorising and praxis, “for by seeing ecological concerns in terms of human interests they can be set in relation to other interests when devising institutions and policies” (Hayward 1998: 1). For example, the UN Conference on Human Environment (1972) and the UN Conference on Environment and Development (1992) essentially incorporate the words ‘*human*’ and ‘*development*’ respectively, which both suggest an anthropocentric concern for intrinsic human well being (UN 1998). As Sachs suggests the “essence of sustainability is to be found in a particular relationship between people *and* people rather than people and nature” (1999: 159). Moreover, he continues that “the concept can be a corner stone to a new ethical framework; it extends the principle of *human equality* along the axis of time” (ibid, emphasis added). Thus, in the political (communicative) world anthropocentrism is essential in implementing environmental policy.

Despite conflicting with ‘deep ecology,’ Habermasian critical thought could offer shallow ecology a political theory that does not treat all technology and science as capitalist instruments of accumulation, but as instruments that can improve humanity’s quality of life. Moreover, because humans are subjective, Habermas does not deny that we can “adopt a performative attitude to external nature, enter into communicative relations with it, [or] have aesthetic experience and feelings analogous to morality with respect to it” (cited in Hayward 1994: 46). Here, non-instrumental attitudes may aid the ecological movement in the communicative relations between

humans, but they do not present the practical theoretical efficacy of applying instrumental reason in view of environmental protection as detailed below. For example, the intrinsic value given to certain animals and materials is largely insignificant to industrial society's instrumental perception of oil, gas, and coal.

Moreover, Habermas's main critique of instrumental reason is that political decision making, what he categorises as *communicative reason*, has been increasingly reduced to *pragmatic instrumentality*. This serves the capitalist and bureaucratic system of Enlightenment and constitutes the "*scientisation of politics*." (1982: 219, 1972, see also 1987). Consequently this has seen the public cede power and decision making to a technocratic elite who put *quantitative instrumental progress*, such as industry and capitalism, above more *qualitative* concerns, such as the effect environmental degradation has on *human well being*. Here, the *subjective* concern toward the aesthetic surroundings of *humans* in communicative reason is the most *efficacious* way of mobilising practical *instrumental rationality* into finding environmental solutions. Unlike Marcuse (1972), Habermas does not want to alter our instrumental perceptions of the natural world, which is separate from our communicative rationality, but would rather reconsider how we apply that rationality in respect to humankind's physical well-being. It is because Habermas is so concerned with the theoretical difficulties of gaining either "moral or epistemological access to "nature in itself" that he prefers to perceive it instrumentally and generate solutions to the environmental problems Enlightenment has caused from within a subjectively principled anthropocentrism" (Dobson 1993).

Despite the philosophical objections made by Eckersly, Habermasian critical thought also presents international relations and shallow ecology with a methodological framework for studying global environment issues. Habermas suggests that there are three types of knowledge used in social theory: empirical-analytical (natural sciences), historical-hermeneutic (concerned with meaning and understanding) and the critical sciences (concerned with emancipation) (Habermas, 1987, see also Smith 1996: 27).

Here, analytical-empirical methods are important in understanding the environment scientifically if we are to conceive the extent and effects of environmental damage. As Sachs comments, “ecology was ripe for restructuring along the lines of positivist methodology; like any other science it was to produce causal hypotheses that are empirically testable and prognostically relevant” (1999: 62). The results from such science enable us to know that carbon dioxide contributes to 60% of the anthropogenic green house effect and so on (Middleton 1995: 102-115).

However, the critical perspective combined with an interest in communicative reason and hermeneutics (understanding the social and political effects) will constantly question the application of science. For example, the so-called Green Revolution championed that instrumental rationality (natural science) could elevate world hunger using genetically modified crops and chemical fertilisers. After initial trails in the third world the combined economic cost of buying non-reproductive seeds, the cost of fertilisers and decreases in the labour needed to farm them proved too great. The revolution is now seen as increasing hunger by causing unemployment and expensive growing costs to third world communities (Middleton 1995, Dobson 1993, Ekersley 1990, 1992). Important here is the distinction between scientific problem solving theory in *praxis* and insights offered by critical interpretative theory towards the application of praxis in society now and in the future (Cox 1996, Lafferriere and Stoett 1999). As illustrated below and as incorporated into Habermas’s three types of knowledge, instrumental rationality (or problem solving theory) needs to be considered *critically* and alongside *hermeneutics* in the social world if political, economic or cultural elements are at issue.

Because of the linguistic communication of scientific data into the social world (involving hermeneutic interpretation in communicative rationality), Habermas also states that in politics there is no such thing as ‘true’ empirical statements (1987). For example, the US Energy Agency’s estimation that global warming will rise by 0.23% by 2100 is opposed to the UN Panel on Climate Change’s prediction of 5.8% (*The Guardian* 07/04/01). Here, the US government sides with the instrumental rationality of American oil, gas and other industrial corporations. This arguably puts big business

first in terms of industrial and economic growth rather than the health and qualitative well-being of the American people. This is *reflected* in their empirical statements. Moreover, these opposing views also illustrate Cox's critical reflection that, "theory is always *for* someone and *for* some purpose" (1996: 87).

Moreover, in relation to applying communicative theory into praxis, Habermasian thought emphasises the importance of social movements in communicative reason as they can emphasise the dark-side of instrumental rationality in industrial society (1982). Although critics will argue that communicative reason's emancipatory ability is flawed due to existing social inequalities, Dobson (1995) and similarly Gill and Law (1988) argue that these social movements are becoming more vocal and believe the agendas of international organisations may be changed by popular mobilisation. This mobilisation can mediate, as can the media, universities and even factions inside government, within and between global economic, political and social structures (Stubbs and Underhill 2000).

Here, post-modernists will argue that establishing ethical and moral principles via communicative reason is impossible due to a lack of consensus across cultures (Steans and Pettiford 2001). However, an absence of mobilisation and pressure from different social groups, especially the participation of groups across nations, "would mean that some [environmental] issues would not be tackled, or tackled too late" (ibid). This includes the practical and normative interest (such as emancipation) in Habermasian thinking as the ethical and ecological considerations in *human* society are important because, "once one acknowledges the capacity for *human* agency to change the world, it becomes incumbent on one to consider how to do so" (Cutler, 2000:161, emphasis added).

In conclusion, Dobson contends that historical and economic hermeneutic accounts of *human* actions in relation to environmental issues will improve ecological theorists understanding of the mindset of industrialised and capitalist society in developing a "less utopian vision of green thought and a more realistic [practical] paradigm of

human reason” (1993, emphasis added). If ecological thought is to have any impact on decision-makers, despite some existing support from various groups and individuals, than ecological theorists will have to stress the effects environmental degradation and exploitation have on *humankind's* future living standards and material conditions. Despite the interesting philosophical questions deep ecology raises, environmental protection has to be approached in a practical sense that integrates environmental policy into existing policies and practices that will not dramatically alter the publics' lifestyle and allows existing institutions to gradually become environmentally sound. This means communicative political action between humans and humans will change *our* current instrumental destruction of *our* environment. In incorporating Habermasian notions of *human* rationality, ecologists can better understand our human centred ontologies and formulate more realistic policies to protect the environment in a world dominated by rational and *anthropocentric human beings*.

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