

The Environmentalist “What Is To Be Done”?

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On the very first page of their paper, “The Death of Environmentalism,” co-authors Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus (2005:1) make a prototypically political claim. “[M]odern environmentalism is no longer capable of dealing with the world’s most serious ecological crisis. Over the past 15 years environmental foundations and organizations have invested hundreds of millions of dollars into combating global warming. We have strikingly little to show for it.”

It is a *political* judgment; a critique emerges from the estimate that the movement has underachieved. Disappointment could be explained away by reference to the power arrayed against environmentalism, or the failure could be recast as progress, or the cause’s very rightness could be conflated with its strategic and tactical choices, justifying all of it at once. If there were only a narrow range of options for political action, the indeterminacy my little puzzle evokes would not amount to much. In that case, political failure is failure – for whatever reason, the issue didn’t “catch on.” We tried.

As it happens, contemporary environmentalism emerged at a point in American political history when indeterminacy, arguably, was on the rise after a long period of enforced consensus during which it was easier to simplify political decisions. New arenas for political action were created, including social movements, with their more open sense

of possibilities, strategies, and constituents. Judgments driven by convention became less reliable as partisanship increased. To be sure, state and corporate power was consolidating, but means for threatening or negotiating with that power could be imagined (and sometimes even enacted) as well.

This brief politico-historical fable could be given several names. But, for our purposes, I propose that the most efficient name is this: it is the tale of modernism's exhaustion. A political era has been drawing to a close. In that modernist era, the variability of political options steadily diminished and that in turn tended to diminish indeterminacy. Political communities usually were understood as political markets. Once rights were protected, especially the crucial property right, proposals either rose or fell in the marketplace. The metaphor of the market worked, in part because there was so little variation in how ideas were marketed; lack of options was perceived as unanimity. If the conventional approach did not work, the proposal was thought to "lack appeal," or to have been "rejected by the public." Failure meant that a constituency (the public, or some government decision maker) had ruled, as was their right to rule, given the structure of the political community.

Environmentalists in the U.S. have long been awkward modernists. On one hand, most environmentalists – dating back to Thoreau – would surely resist the modernist label altogether. If the bourgeois middle class (with its values and cultural predispositions) is a modernist accomplishment, just about every notable environmentalist thinker would denounce modernism, just for that. Muir a modernist? Bob Marshall? Aldo Leopold? Indeed, environmentalists preferred to be seen as the ushers in modernism's recent retreat. After all, the critique of industry and technology –

and the modernist optimism they underwrite – is among environmentalism's characteristic claims.

But in other ways, environmentalists doubled back, sometimes joining – and even epitomizing – the modernism they otherwise criticize. For example, the environmentalist attraction to politicized science so effectively criticized by Bruno Latour is clearly a vestige of modernism, which is confident that science can solve problems otherwise mired in superstition or partisanship. Although the relationships between Christianity and modernism can be obscure, American modernism incorporated Christian moralism, following the model of American Protestantism. Environmentalists learned their moralism from Thoreau, who popularized and radicalized Emerson. As appealing as those models were, they were not immune from infection by the old New England jeremiad – a haranguing, proud, and politically debilitating form that environmentalists seem to have decided is transparently and simply American. In response to this moralism, openings turn up everywhere for the politics of resentment so acutely explained by Nietzsche.

(As an aside, it is the case, as many of Shellenberger and Nordhaus's critics emphasize, that the American environmental movement is not necessarily monolithic. In some cases, the tensions mentioned in the previous paragraph can be mapped to different elements of the movement, or different stages of its development. In all, I still think it is appropriate to speak of an environmentalist culture or perspective. Increasingly, the grassroots groups and national groups share rhetoric, values, and political commitments. The large groups – with their large publicity and membership budgets – set the tone, buttressed by a relatively monolithic environmentalist political culture at the same time

that they recreate it. And the small groups, increasingly adept at lobbying and litigating, increasingly sing the same song.)

So, back to Shellenberger and Nordhaus. How are we to think about what is to be done? The decline of programmatic, modernist thought leaves no larger absence than this one. Reliable bedrocks in the otherwise persistently ambiguous political world are not so reliable any more. The traditional homilies and historical lessons are less convincing. It is not so obvious that America has a deeply centrist politics, for example, nor that corporate elites are even passably responsible (for anything). The same is true for the corresponding nostrum, long taken as given, that American politics takes a terrible toll on anyone who ventures too deeply into radical ideology. It becomes harder to ignore the possibility that American values and religiosity can invert, as Nietzsche predicted for all western moralism, into resentment. These are just a few examples, but throughout American political life one can find signs of a landscape far more negotiable than most Americans had thought possible.

This indeterminacy, intensified in a citizenry bewildered by the demise of a reliable political centre, is sometimes re-enacted in remarkable ways. An apolitical American public, having learned to leave politics to someone else, shows its exasperation at what the political world does in its name. The “what is to be done” question (in modernism’s alternative version, Lenin’s question, to which I shall return near the end of this essay) implicates all of politics; how do we think about proposals, what constitutes success, what are the really important dangers (as distinct from the irritants and distractions)? Which are the powerful agents of change, and which are irrelevant? What

moves public opinion and when does it matter? These are the questions necessarily raised whenever we inhabit political space.

Resentment

Resentment may be the wildest card in the environmentalist “what is to be done” game. It infects environmentalists and their now habitual politics of complaint. If there is a surprise, it is that the American right’s resentful anti-environmentalism has been so successful at countering environmentalists, even when the science is solid and purposes clearly public (rather than amenity based, or otherwise private or special). Climate change is the obvious example. One might have thought that this issue, finally, would end charges of NIMBYism. Instead, it often has been a boon for America’s environmentalist adversaries, who, as Chris Mooney (2005) argued in a well-received book, have managed to manoeuvre junk science and nonsensical rhetoric into an effective and sustained gridlock in U.S. climate change policy (although, at this writing, it is possible that the new Democratic Congress in 2007 might start to change that). The ultimate political question of our age might just be how to combat that counterrevolutionary resentment and to simultaneously change the patterns that diminish environmentalist political power.

The 2004 U.S. election served as a laboratory for that resentment, with its several echoes of the Vietnam era. As I have argued elsewhere (Chaloupka 2005), Bush’s win established a new plateau in the right’s deployment of its oddly symbolic politics, even though the left did learn a thing or two. Despite some success in the 2006 elections, American environmentalists have yet to develop a satisfactory response to right wing resentment. Calls to liberal citizenship or civility don’t much distract the Swift Boaters

and anti-environmentalist resenters. Other than the habitual (and obviously ineffective) “tsk, tsk” at the bogus sciences of creationism and the climate change apologists, environmentalists do not really have a strategy for dealing with the resentment that corrodes their movement from within and positively checkmates it, in the hands of the new conservatism.

There are good reasons for environmentalism’s difficulty in dealing with resentment, either their own or as wielded by adversaries. Modernism has always assumed the straightforward, conscious declaration; the characteristic modernist moment happens when Locke’s citizen articulates a self-interest. The alliance between modernism and straightforward declaration is what set the stage for structuralism and, then, post-structuralism. Beneath the surface of Locke’s declaring citizen lie contradictory impulses. As he fully understood, Nietzsche’s explanation of the pervasiveness and power of resentment aimed an arrow at modernism’s heart.

Still, modernism was not simply overturned by structuralists or other critics, in part because modernism had momentum and power. Instead, it often seems more descriptive to suggest that the weight of its accomplishments had begun to wear modernism down, limiting its resilience. Modernism’s defences were eroded, diminished in part by adversaries who did not share modernism’s sense of its own perpetual inevitability. Resentment reflected modernism’s looming exhaustion at the same time that it fostered that condition of fatigue.

Environmentalism is both a leading harbinger of modernism’s exhaustion and a victim of corrosive resentment. The persistent environmentalist overconfidence is modernist. But any movement founded on its own moral superiority, buttressed by

scientific authority, risks opening itself to attack. Having understood the power of Nature arguments and the rhetorical privilege that science produces, even while modernist age limps on, environmentalists faced a potential trap. The existence of the trap, in itself, might not have been fatal; but the lack of attention to it turned a dangerous situation toward political calamity.

Each political failure could be explained by the overwhelming power of adversaries (of course, we can't win on global warming – we're up against Exxon!). The environmental version of resentment ensued: since science is on our side, each of our failures is unjust and irrational. Environmentalism's are rarely perceived as connected to the basic configuration of their own politics. This pattern, to be sure oversimplified here to make a point, re-enacts a classical pattern. This is tragedy on a Shakespearean scale, in which a potential hero undoes him- or herself by being inattentive to their own flaws as well as to the actual conditions of the situation.

In *States of Injury*, Wendy Brown examined the resentment exhibited in feminism. I will return to Brown later, on the topic of legalism, but parts of her analysis are useful here, as when she situates feminism's political dilemma, suggesting that it exhibits a form of Nietzschean resentment:

Developing a righteous critique of power from the perspective of the injured, [this element of feminism] delimits a specific site of blame for suffering by constituting sovereign subjects and events as responsible for the "injury" [, fixing] the identities of the injured and the injuring as social positions.... [In] its economy of perpetrator and victim, this project seeks not power or emancipation ..., but the

revenge of punishment, making the perpetrator hurt as the sufferer does (Brown, 1995: 27).

As Brown explains, this feminist tendency to highlight women's role as victim (in a resentful relationship to a victimizer) risks becoming apolitical. The resentful reaction portrays a flight from politics that overlaps significantly with the environmentalist variant, betraying "a preference for extrapolitical terms and practices: for Truth (unchanging, incontestable) over politics (flux, contest, instability) " (Brown, 1995: 37).

This flight from politics can be understood, in terms John Dewey (1929) explained, as symptomatic of a corrosive quest for certainty. Protesting the demise of certainty, resentment lashes out. Brown (1995: 39) describes as "feminist panic" the exuberant criticism that confronted intellectuals who argued that the subject positions and strategic choices she details as resentful feminism should be confronted. Of course, environmentalists have had their own panic over precisely these issues (Chaloupka, 2000). Some of the reactions to Nordhaus and Shellenberger seem precisely evidence of panic. And panic, as Arthur Kroker (1989) has argued, is an indicator of thorough and serious conditions.

Since it works at such a core level, resentment is the sort of diagnosis that could prompt a thorough reassessment of politics. A political position both infected by its own resentment and bedevilled by its opposition's resentment has a core problem, something more basic and strategic than tactical and superficial. Some recognition of the seriousness of the situation we face could yet trigger a piece-by-piece re-evaluation of environmentalist political history, theory, and prospects. What is the relationship between the personal dimension (the organic garden, bicycle, and home solar heater) and policy

(pursuing energy conservation policies, prohibiting food additives, and promoting mass transit)? What is the environmentalist position on technological solutions? Or on corporate and so-called market solutions? In the past, environmentalists have debated some important political questions – the issues of grassroots vs. “big green” and the role of foundation funding, both raised by Mark Dowie (1996, 2001), come to mind. Nonetheless, the kind of political challenge opened up by Shellenberger and Nordhaus is much broader than previous environmentalist political debates.

In political terms, it is hard to imagine a movement that is truly flummoxed, politically, by Kansas creationism (see Frank) solving the world’s climate change problem. Perhaps more than citizens of other industrialized nations, Americans have proven their capacity to resist being convinced to change much of anything on the basis of orders from scientists. Instead, the edicts of what are perceived to be moralistic, superior, and unsympathetic elite scientists are an easy target for those political groups who stand to gain from populist resentment. And, certainly in the U.S., the politics of resentment has become a finely honed and massively successful political strategy. This is not to say that it cannot be countered, but that it will have to be taken seriously.

Shellenberger and Nordhaus, environmental activists who propose a post-environmentalism, put core elements of the movement up for grabs. Nature, class, and technology are among those core issues, but there are others. The very composition of environmentalism is at stake. To take this further, I now turn to the scientism that has defined the modernist urge within environmentalism.

Scientism

“The Death of Environmentalism” essay was awkward on the question of technology. It is true that few environmentalists ever saw an air scrubber, solar panel, running shoe, or catalytic converter they didn’t immediately love. But it is also true that some of environmentalism’s liveliness comes from its apparent nervousness about modernism, nicely summarized by the title of Latour’s 1993 book, *We Have Never Been Modern*. Long having had to manage the seeming contradiction (of a modernist anti-modernism) is probably a source of environmentalism’s strength as well as a potentially damaging flaw.

The risk inherent in that contradiction becomes more evident when we consider environmentalism’s commitment to nature, especially those aspects of nature revealed by science. At the beginning of contemporary environmentalism, much of the movement’s intellectual firepower battled then-dominant sciences. Environmentalists promoted ecology, invented the field of “conservation biology,” struggled to elevate the aspects of biochemistry that dealt with pollutants, fought several disciplines over such questions as population growth and resource depletion, and promoted the field of public health, just to name a few examples. Many fights were won – if, sometimes, after excessive claims were quietly consigned to the dustbin. Especially when environmentalists moved into litigation and administrative lobbying, science became increasingly important.

(It should be noted that some of this impulse to contest dominant science remains in environmentalism, particularly in such proposals as those for “participatory science,” defended by Fischer [2000]. But the contrast with the role of science in climate change politics couldn’t be clearer; at the very base of climate change politics is the

environmentalist ridicule of scientific arguments deployed by the Bush administration. There may once have been an environmentalist sympathy with diverse sciences, but the crucial case of climate science now establishes the standard – there is one science and scientific disputes can be settled.)

If much of environmentalism challenged modern capitalism, environmentalists also embraced some of the enlightenment's assumptions. Science and nature have formed a partnership, throughout the modern era. But, as modernism frayed, it became increasingly evident how much effort it took, through the centuries, to make the findings of science (and, thus, nature itself) appear natural, rather than artificial. Much of Michel Foucault's most persuasive work involves this issue; the liberal era *created* forms of power and worked hard to maintain that power. Whole knowledges were invented and then applied to the always-problematic issue of governance. And one of the most compelling ways to make power seem appropriate and just has long been to make it seem natural.

As a movement, environmentalism understood that it had to challenge the modernist confidence in the "scientific" mastery of resources, populations, and wealth. These challengers knew this would not be easy; the modern arrangements seemed obvious and inevitable. After all, modernism built itself by arguing that its authority was based on the truths it had identified in human nature. By the time contemporary environmentalism emerged, especially in the U.S., capitalism had effectively incorporated Marx's explanations about the social nature of production (itself, in turn, an interaction with resources).

Environmentalism did not discover nature; it took advantage of a rhetorical commitment close to the heart of modernism (i.e., nature), and then used nature against modernism's favourite accomplishments (e.g., capitalism and industry). But, especially in this one way, environmentalism is itself modernist: its politics depends on naturalizing a whole range of claims that are not as "natural" as environmentalists assert. The political power of modernism came to be associated with its naturalism; what modernism claimed just seemed natural. Contemporary environmentalism masterfully undermined the old order's claim to be normal and natural. They did not do this in the name of several natures, but in Nature's name. The aim was not so much to problematize the old liberal, capitalist, and industrialist claim on the very power of nature, as to capture it. Instantly, environmentalists became as dependent on naturalism as any modernist ever was. A drama was set in motion, one as dizzyingly coherent with the shape of our world as the best literary dramas, perhaps Shakespearian, or even Leninist.

Latour's *Politics of Nature* (2004) posits environmentalists as contemporary scientist-kings, fulfilling Plato's mission. But these scientist-kings come equipped with their own debilitation already incorporated. Instead of a *political* theory of relatedness – something that might emerge from a Foucauldian insight into naturalism – environmentalists substitute an ethical admonition against human interest (almost the precise inverse of Foucault's argument), at the same time also proposing a paradoxically elevated role for science. The consequence is moralism yoked to scientism, with the odd rhetorical flourish against the public (social, human) interest added for flavour.

While environmentalists struggled to make this ensemble not only seem natural, but also to serve as the effective voice of nature, their adversaries had a proverbial field

day pressuring the many potential contradictions. Authoritarian American conservatives could deflect the issue of their own authoritarianism by imputing the same characteristic to environmentalists. Apologists for capitalism, which has always confused self-interest with progress (often to its great political benefit), could complain about their critics' pessimism, elaborating yet another critique environmentalists never adequately parried. Mapping these tensions and traps, some features of environmental politics in the U.S. become more visible. The strengths and weaknesses of environmentalism lie in close proximity to one another. This is not unique to environmentalism, but the configuration is unusual.

Latour (2004:3) begins his argument with an explicit claim that environmentalists (who he calls "political ecologists") should not have claimed so quickly and absolutely to be "getting beyond" the dichotomies of man and nature." This rush to capture the authority Nature has long granted modernist political power has its consequences: "ecologists were a little too quick to pat themselves on the back when they put forward their slogan 'Think globally, act locally.' Where 'global thinking' is concerned, they have come up with nothing better than a nature already composed, already totalized, already instituted to neutralize politics" (Latour, 2004:3). Among the specific problems with environmental globalism are the ways in which it embraced science, then mixed that science with something else. For ecological movements, "science remains a mirror of the world.... [One] can almost always, in their literature, take the terms 'nature' and 'science' to be *synonyms*" (Latour, 2004:4, his emphasis). This ambitious use of science then opens environmentalists to a larger problem:

Every time we seek to mix scientific facts with aesthetic, political, economic, and moral values, we find ourselves in a quandary. If we concede too much to facts, the human element in its entirety tilts into objectivity becomes a countable and calculable thing, a bottom line in terms of energy, one species among others. If we concede too much to values, all of nature tilts into the uncertainty of myth, into poetry or romanticism; everything becomes soul and spirit. If we mix facts and values, we go from bad to worse, for we are depriving ourselves of both autonomous knowledge and independent morality (Latour, 2004:4).

The problem is structural: the arena that environmental politics envisions has already been sabotaged, long before contemporary environmentalism emerged.

Most of Latour's (2004:10 ff.) book argues against confusing science and politics. He begins with a telling critique of Plato's cave allegory, with the philosopher cast as the truth-bringing scientist. The allegory "neutralizes democracy" (Latour, 2004:14), disables politics, and is, in the first place, predicated on remarkably antisocial assumptions.

Latour's argument suggests that environmental scientism is among the reasons (for Latour, the central reason) for the failure of environmentalist politics. In the archive of western politics, certain patterns – some admittedly fairly complex – keep being re-enacted, not necessarily for any other reason than the intensity and durability of some social and political concepts, as they interact with ongoing political events.

The force of Latour's argument can be summarized in a single neologism. By casually inventing the term "multinaturalism," Latour exhibits the stakes of his own challenge to environmental politics (and to all modernisms that rely heavily on Nature arguments). Long ago, we became accustomed to terms like "multinationals" or

“multiculturalism.” But “multinaturalism” is obviously and tellingly odd; it is opaque, leading us to wonder what it means. For his part, Latour’s meaning is clear. If we were able to understand multinaturalism (say, as easily as we understand multiculturalism) we might start to understand the necessity of a politics layer between “science” and “nature.” That layer might sometimes be resentful, anti-intellectual, and authoritarian. Latour doesn’t address the fact that some anti-science movements, notably fundamentalist creationism, are both political and frightening. But one suspects the anti-science crowd would be easier to deal with if environmentalists had their *political* wits about them, which Latour argues is improbable, given the current constellation of environmental ideas about science and nature.

Legalism

Brown’s indictment of a feminism that preferred the extrapolitical to the political (with its antagonism and contingency), cited earlier in this essay, continues on to identify the tendency of a particular kind of feminism to prefer “separable subjects armed with established rights and identities over unwieldy and shifting pluralities” (Brown, 1998:37). This should serve as a reminder that modernist liberalism promoted a very specific political modality, organized by *rights*. Marx’s alt.modernism, at its most basic, was organized as a broad contradiction of the legitimacy accorded liberal rights. It is in this sense (as well as in the environmentalist reliance on science) that Shellenberger and Nordhaus sometimes refer to environmentalists as heirs of the enlightenment. This is easily confirmed if one remembers how profoundly important the “rights of trees” and

the ethical argument of anthropocentrism (in which humans are precisely and permanently delineated from non-humans) have been for environmentalism.

Since the examples of serious environmentalist political analysis are rare, it might be useful to watch another movement working this out. I will follow the example set out by Wendy Brown and Janet Halley (2002) in their introduction to a book they edited, *Left Legalism/ Left Critique*. Brown and Halley (2002:7-8) “want to scrutinize projects of the left that invoke the liberal state’s promise to make justice happen by means of law. Our concern is with a strong turn by the left in recent decades, and especially with the implications of this turn ... for left political aims.” By “left,” they generally mean the ensemble of political initiatives that might once have been part of anti-capitalism, civil rights, and other movements, but are now best described as identity politics. Their essay does not mention environmentalism – in itself an indication of how separate environmentalism has become from the American left.

The legalism that Brown and Halley challenge has also been at the environmental core; in almost every realm of American environmental activism, court decisions have been central – and often, definitive. The eventual impacts of the Wilderness Act, the Endangered Species Act, and the Environmental Protection Act were produced by court decisions that elaborated positions barely visible, if at all, in the original legislation. For years, one of the most popular works in the American environmental political imagination was Christopher Stone’s “Should Trees Have Standing?”, an explicit transposition of civil rights law into the environmental arena. “Animal rights” claims dominate the entire realm of animal activism even though there are distinctions within environmental thought on that issue. And the entire body of thought about

anthropocentrism presumes to create subjects out of non-human entities, so that their “rights” might be protected.

Environmentalists often like to say slyly that they are the “true conservatives,” with their focus on conservation. But when it comes to politics, they are, in fact, overwhelmingly liberal. The state is generally unquestionable, except at some utopian level that has little to do with actual political strategies. No other configuration of sovereignty is much worth pursuing, unless it is the state writ large enough to enforce carbon emission rules negotiated in international protocol meetings. “Rights” activism will do just fine, as long as the non-human entities environmentalists speak for can be recognized in court. Environmentalists are the *representatives* of natural phenomena.

Today, liberalism has become so dominant on the left (whether in environmental or identity variants) that we need to be jarred into remembering that rights were not always assumed to be so central. Brown and Halley (2002:9; see also Kennedy) provide just such an intervention:

[R]ights are not the only form in which the left has sought to mobilize the implicit promise of the liberal state that it will attempt to make justice happen by means of law. In the early ... twentieth century what put the left on the political map in the United States was, surely, pursuit of collective bargaining. [T]his effort involved an *attack* on rights in the form of freedom of contract and strong property entitlements; when the core left project was collective bargaining, employers’ monopoly over rights – and thus rights – were viewed as *the problem*. [N]either the procedure nor the remedy was centrally legalistic or liberal. Eventually, more legalistic rights to unionize, to strike, and to fair representation took shape.

Clearly, the pursuit of collective bargaining could be (and has been) rephrased in terms of rights; the point of the example is that a struggle over the very character of the state preceded that rephrasing, historically. The American labour movement did not just assume that it was playing the liberal state's game by its rules. As Duncan Kennedy (2002) notes, this was in fact among the most important fault lines in American politics a century ago, with reformists pursuing strategies safely within the various limitations of the liberal state, and radicals working beyond those limits to create political possibilities.

As Brown and Halley explain, the left followed the civil rights movement into legalism and an emphasis on rights. This was the path environmentalists took, as well. Brown and Halley explain that space still remains for critique, after the turn to legalism. The distinctively liberal project of pursuing rights has any number of political consequences that deserve critique. The "rights seeker," to cite one important consequence, risks solidifying a particular identity by pursuing rights: "legalism has regulatory capacities which have been particularly dangerous for left projects because they remain so ... unavowed" (Brown and Halley: 11). Among the political consequences of liberal legalism is the creation of openings for one's opponents. In American identity politics, the creation of affirmative action policies opened up the possibility that "all race-based equality jurisprudence would be the target of the same backlash ostensibly aimed only at affirmative action," an effect that could hardly have been intended (Brown and Halley: 17). Similarly, endangered species legislation and litigation produced openings for resentful opposition.

In another of Brown and Halley's examples, the pursuit of legal remedy for racial discrimination "could not have intended the startling effect ... that, once legitimated by

the Supreme Court only to the extent that it promoted ‘diversity,’ affirmative action as practiced in educational institutions would effectively require its beneficiaries ... to consolidate rather than mobilize identities produced by racially organized power” (Brown and Halley: 17; see also Ford). This would be one of the ways the resentful identity is cemented in place, promoting the left politics of resentment I addressed earlier. The environmental equivalent is easy enough to find; “nature” has to be spoken for by the scientific discourse that works in court.

Brown and Halley wonder whether their minority students have hemmed themselves in, adopting a victim identity that assures their admissions to elite universities, but may also constrain their future choices. For environmentalists, this plays out in the permanently dismal stance, bemoaning lost wilderness acres or species gone extinct. These might indeed be the most important contemporary environmental effects, but it is also the case (seldom overlooked by adversaries) that they correspond to what works in court and, once the constituencies are trained, in fundraising appeals. Of course, the anti-environmentalists also note with glee how odd it is to base a politics on the premise of being persistently dismal.

Is liberal legalism in fact the only available choice? Brown and Halley (2002:19) admit that contemporary life is so “saturated by legalism ... that it is often difficult to imagine alternative[s].” But they persist in the search: “the legal realist point that law is politics by other means should not commit us to its converse: that all endeavors to shape and order collective life are legalistic.” Specifically, “politics conceived and practiced legalistically bears a certain hostility to discursively open-ended, multigenre, and polyvocal political conversations about how we should live, what we should value and

what we should prohibit, and what is possible in collective life” (Brown and Halley, 2002:19). Accordingly, Brown and Halley (2002:22) set out to trace some of the political effects legalism has had in identity politics, and what they find resonates with environmental politics, as well.

The adversarial structure of rights legalism as deployed by all the parties meant that the stakes were now “winner takes all.” In that context neither side could risk nuance, internal dissension, or differentiation of positions along a continuum. Hence the debates produced a new form of internal silencing of each side’s constituents; solidarity and a united front became mandatory. Above all, neither side could afford to break with liberalism.

Consider the fight over the spotted owl in the Pacific Northwest. It was either loggers or owls; the rights accorded the owls by the Endangered Species Act either existed or not. If those rights were legitimate, the loggers were out of business. Even the attempt by Clinton and Gore to negotiate a way out of the impasse was largely stymied by court actions. In political terms, could one now, from an environmental perspective, be convinced that the gain in owls was more important than the loss of support for environmental issues, including the whole question of climate change, which was then at a very preliminary political stage?

Among Brown’s strategies has been an ongoing effort to undo the liberal gridlock she believes women’s politics has too often tolerated. To cite one example with particular resonance for environmentalists, consider Brown’s earlier effort to respond to the resentment she found within the American women’s movement of the 1990s. In response she proposed a subtle but significant resituating of feminist political dialogue. Instead of

relying excessively on rhetoric that emphasized the injuries women had suffered as women (assuming that sympathy with injury was the first step to political action), Brown suggested a different rhetoric intended to redirect feminist resentment. Instead of a politics that insisted, roughly, “this is what has been done to me,” Brown suggested, “this is what I want for us.” The latter has more to do with King’s “I have a dream” than with the American jeremiad that assumes mechanisms of guilt and reparation.

The odd complaint, often heard lately, that the left needs “values” might in fact be about the configuration of left moralism. The left has always, manifestly possessed values – preferences that, to the left’s credit, are more public than personal in orientation. By saying that the left doesn’t have values, the right is, in code, reminding its audience that left values can be reconfigured as bitter and hurtful. At its best, “This is what I want for us” is neither. First of all, it implies an “us,” a community that is already composed and will need further articulation, since its existence can hardly be presumed (especially if we think it still needs work on what it should want). Furthermore, that question does not assume that solutions automatically inhere in the acknowledgement of past injury.

Clearly, the sentiment behind “this is what I want for us” – generally mirrored in Nordhaus and Shellenberger’s “aspirational politics” – can be sabotaged in the roughhouse of American politics. But the approach is suggestive; for environmentalists who seem fervently to believe that the biggest problems they face are chemical and biological or are simply embodied in corporate power and arrogance, it would be a major step to acknowledge that their political vision cannot simply be accepted as valid. Brown’s deceptively simple question carries with it a promise for change.

Projects

Vladimir Lenin's "What is to be Done?" distilled, in its title, what is perhaps *the* crucial political question. Even after a situation is diagnosed, entailing causes and conditions (all of which prefigure particular solutions), a gap remains. Crucial actors must be identified. Allies must be rallied to the cause, and that rally must be built back into diagnoses, terminology, and even into the aesthetics of political text, speech, and action. Goals must be identified, and they must conform, more or less, to their justifications. Crucial institutions must be studied, and distinguished on some basis from the other, less crucial institutions, lest they distract from the struggle. In preparation for action, agreement must be built and resistances weakened.

Potential blockages – for example, antagonistic forces that will be mobilized by the forthcoming action – must be anticipated. Sources of confusion (including the fool's gold of misleading "successes" that actually promote or disguise real failure) must be located. In every radical setting, a new political logic must be created, mapping routes from idea to action, passing through argument, response to criticisms, chains of cause and effect, some weighting of potential consequences, and so on. But by listing the moves inherent in Lenin's question, I do not mean to suggest that they are somehow self-evident or otherwise independent of some intellectual apparatus. Quite the opposite.

Lenin's question (along with his answer) was made possible by an underlying apparatus of political thought, mostly Marxist. Before Lenin formulated his question, he had already solved, for himself, a whole set of preceding questions. Most pertained to the conditions that allow genuine political progress. He emphasized the loss of hope in rights guaranteed by the governance and economic structures that then prevailed, for example.

And he had been convinced that dramatic change would rather easily overcome the costs incurred, issuing post-revolutionary benefits that would be obvious. In short, we catch Lenin's question mid-leap; much political thought has already happened, and the hard landing might yet be avoided. The simplicity and directness of "What is to be done?" is itself an artefact of a modernist moment that was, even as Lenin wrote, beginning the steep decline that Leninism's fortunes would eventually confirm.

So it is with any insistence on an answer to Lenin's question; to ask the question too quickly is to assume that the preparatory effort has been completed and is satisfactory, that there are no more intellectual questions much worth asking – only practical ones, the questions close to the pragmatic heart of contemporary activists, especially in the U.S. The environmentalist insistence on the centrality of science in composing their politics is, in this context, a claim that all other important questions have already been answered. Latour's complaint about scientism and Brown's critique of legalism both confront this claim. If we move too quickly, we risk assuming wrongly that all the work that needs to be done has been done on environmental rights, state sovereignty, capital, corporatism, and the ethics of anthropocentrism.

Still, as badly as Lenin's own map played in the twentieth century, we can hardly begrudge him one of the best-ever political titles. What is to be done? His title is precise. The question is not "what are we to do?" That question would prematurely presume a "we," which could be invoked as if its meaning were apparent. Lenin intends to contest the "we," challenging liberal individualism and enabling the emergence of a more promising "we." His book (published in 1902) argued that while workers might be predisposed to accept socialism, their conversion would not take place spontaneously. A

“party of a new type” had to be invented and had to become the “vanguard” of the proletariat. The socioeconomic class and vanguard replaced the individuals and elite leaders identified as agents in the logic of liberalism. Not only did the new class have to be imagined: the mechanisms for its emergence and eventual triumph also must be identified. The idea was to invent a new “we,” but to accomplish that, the old discursive elements would have to be made to seem strange and partisan, rather than obvious and “natural.”

At the very beginning of Lenin’s first chapter, his project emerges through his criticism of Bernstein, his foil of choice. It is worthwhile to watch Lenin laying out his project, since he is so specific about its components:

Bernstein has surrounded [his] political demand [for reformism] with a whole battery of well-attuned “new” arguments and reasonings. Denied was the possibility of putting socialism on a scientific basis and of demonstrating its necessity and inevitability from the point of view of the materialist conception of history. Denied was the fact of growing impoverishment, the process of proletarianisation, and the intensification of capitalist contradictions; the very concept, “*ultimate aim*,” was declared to be unsound, and the idea of the dictatorship of the proletariat was completely rejected. Denied was the antithesis in principle between liberalism and socialism. Denied was *the theory of the class struggle*, on the alleged grounds that it could not be applied to a strictly democratic society governed according to the will of the majority, etc. (Lenin, 1902:1-2, his emphasis).

The “etc.” at the end is telling; this paragraph-long rant at a reformist critic also maps out an alternative. The pieces were in place, suggesting the logic of scientific socialism and historical materialism; the role of necessity and inevitability; the importance of identifying contradictions and ambitious goals; the outline of such institutional measures

as the dictatorship of the proletariat; the relationship between liberalism and socialism as contradiction rather than difference of degree; the identification of elements (class) and tenor (struggle); and the importance of departing from the democratic setting, just to hit the high points. Etcetera.

Dusting off Lenin's question may help make modernism's naturalism more visible as a project. Keeping Lenin's alt.modernism in mind, it might be easier to remember that liberalism's moves are just as strategic, even if they might seem obvious because they proved so successful. For scientific socialism, substitute "human nature," "science," and, eventually, "social science." For "historical materialism," substitute the liberal commitment to (usually incremental) progress; for inevitability, substitute nature (when in doubt, always substitute nature); for contradiction, substitute values; for ambitious goals, substitute dismal realism (or, on occasion, vain utopianism); for the proletariat's dictatorship, substitute representative democracy. Remap all political differences as matters of degree or deception, but never contradiction or actual derangement – for class, citizen; for struggle, deliberation. Etcetera.

Still, the challenge persists. If Lenin's smart alt.modernism failed so spectacularly, doesn't that prove that liberalism and capitalism are natural? This is where Foucault is most helpful. He shows how much effort has gone into making liberalism appear natural. He shows how habits, institutions, and whole schemes of social logic emerged as part of this enormous project. "Nature" (if it exists in any meaningful way) just is; whatever this scheme of governance is called, has required huge maintenance efforts. Hopefully, the relevance of Lenin to environmental politics is starting to become clearer. Struggles over political uses of "nature" are hardly new.

Conclusion

Audiences for political talk insist on asking Lenin's question. And I remain sympathetic; the political world is composed by actions and proposals. Any analysis that tries too hard to avoid those questions is courting the apolitical stance that Latour so effectively criticizes, in another context. Still, recognizing all the dangers that attend such a choice, I would slow the rush to answer the environmental version of Lenin's question (while still remembering his model of what it takes to compose a political project). At the very least, a lively political community needs both Lenin's question and the sort of critique Brown enacts. And so another paradox shows up: urgency drives Lenin's question. But precisely the urgency that motivates Lenin's question also has to be kept in check. Critique acknowledges urgency; without urgency, critique would be irrelevant. But critique also retreats from urgency, while still wondering about the way the urgent need is expressed, how it is conceptually connected to the situation, and so forth.

This is the paradox of a thoughtful politics; it is urgent and knows all the reasons for urgency. And, for precisely that reason, it resists a quick answer, entertaining suspicions about any answer that arises too easily. The way I read Shellenberger and Nordhaus, this is precisely the paradox they call for environmentalists to embrace. Environmentalism dearly needs a thoughtful politics, which means in turn that we will hold off a little on the "what is to be done" question, which their diagnosis brought up in the first place. In other words, I am more sympathetic with their project when they are clearing room for political thought, and I am asking them to try to make that aspect of the

project more prominent than their proposed solutions, which sometimes seem rushed. At its best, their essay calls environmentalists to seriously take up the project of opening space for a political dialogue which tests the limits we might have too quickly accepted as reasonable or inevitable. This is not an easy project, so it requires diverse tools, including the sort of political critique Brown advocates.

Ironically, in the last footnote to their essay, Brown and Halley take their defence of intellectual critique back to a founding moment (one not usually much favoured by either feminists or environmentalists). Earlier, we noted that Latour criticized environmentalists for submitting to Plato's dream (in the allegory of the cave, from the *Republic*) of the philosopher-king who leads the wretched captives of the everyday superstitions into the blinding light of the philosopher's truth. Brown and Halley (2002:36-37) visit another of Plato's dialogues to make an altogether different point; the tensions between these two arguments maps the space that must persist in a thoughtful political culture, aware of urgency but also committed to critique.

There is a moment in Plato's *Crito*, after Socrates has been sentenced to death but before he has drunk the hemlock, in which a group of Socrates' friends visit him in prison with an escape plan. To decide whether to go with them, Socrates insists on thinking through both his obligation to Athens and especially to its laws (which he would be breaking if he escaped) and the nature of death (which he would be deferring if he escaped). As Socrates begins to frame the importance of deliberating about the rights and wrongs of escaping, Crito responds impatiently: "I agree with what you say, Socrates, but I wish you would consider what we ought to do."

Lenin's question, it would seem, has been around a long time. Brown and Halley track the implications; "the question of what action to take is so urgent that the basis for the action cannot be examined," and "thinking, questioning, and theorizing are orders of activity different from action." They conclude that "Crito's attitude, supplemented by a certain moralism, has gained an ascendancy in contemporary American political life" (Brown and Halley: 36-7). Time is short, intellectual critique may not offer a reliable and clear answer to urgent questions, so Americans rush to speak of action.

The paradox is heightened when Socrates forces the urgency; he has chosen to drink the hemlock (an action that he is convinced will establish the integrity of the philosopher's role). And he has chosen to do that before Crito's "what is to be done" question is answered, at least to Crito's satisfaction. Latour might read this as another evidence of the scientist's arrogance, and I am compelled by his argument. But I also acknowledge that Socrates' choice can be read as a defence of critique, which is the point Brown and Halley make. So there it is. The urgency of the current situation in environmental politics raises questions that nonetheless must leave room for a sort of thoughtfulness that resists the most urgent answers.

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