

Trumpeter (1996)
ISSN: 0832-6193
Towards an Ecocentric Political Economy

Gus DiZerega
Trumpeter

Much of my writing in environmental philosophy has argued that the widely acknowledged tension between ecocentric ethics and liberal modernity need not be deeply antagonistic. The belief that they are stems from an overly simple conception of the liberal intellectual tradition, one conceiving it in either utilitarian or deontological (natural rights) terms. These liberal traditions are indeed inhospitable to ecocentric concerns. In sharp contrast to ecological reasoning, they consider the individual abstracted away from all social relationships as both their ethical and their analytical unit.

Internal disagreements within these two variants of liberalism can be deep, but none are hospitable to ecocentric insights. Some believe human problems will be best solved in the market order because it most fully and productively facilitates human cooperation. Others are critical of this conclusion, arguing instead that a different liberal institution, the democratic polity, is best able to address the myriad problems of human life. Technophiles make similar claims about liberalism's third defining institution, modern science.

These approaches, and the various permutations and combinations among them, all share a pervasive conceptual blindness to the nature and validity of the other community forms in which we live. Nature is most appropriately dealt with through the market order, centralized political direction, or scientific management, as the case may be. Without denying that these institutions and strategies play important roles with respect to modernity's interface with the natural world, all are deeply inadequate as means for harmonizing humankind with the natural world. Their conceptual framework screens out insights necessary to enable us to bring the modern world into harmony with its environment.

To this extent I agree with the ecocentric critique of liberal modernity. But modern liberalism is hardly exhausted by utilitarian and natural right categories, even though most commentators stop here. Another current in liberal thought is quite compatible with ecocentric insights and provides the conceptual and analytic tools needed to cultivate a more appropriate relationship between modern civilization and the natural world.

The "evolutionary" tradition in liberal thought, has its roots in insights developed by Scottish Enlightenment thinkers such as David Hume, Adam Smith, and Adam Ferguson. It is quite hospitable to an ecocentric ethic for three reasons. First, evolutionary liberals have been concerned with how social order arises in the absence of any deliberate plan to construct it. Their concept of social life as being the product of human action, but not of human design, is an ecological notion. The basic patterns of social life are largely the unplanned outcome of relationships of intricate and unpredictable interconnectedness. In fact, this concept of social evolution provides the most important instance of a concept developed in the social sciences being later adapted for use in the natural sciences, via the work of Charles Darwin.

Second, the thinkers of the Scottish Enlightenment devised, in Smith's terms,

a theory of moral sentiments which can be easily developed into a biocentric ethic. Hume and Smith, in particular, argued that we all have an innate capacity for "sympathy" with others. Due to changing meanings over time, their term 'sympathy' now most resembles what we term empathy. Our natural empathy is a necessary element in even rational self-interested action and, as Hume noted, encompasses animals as well as human beings.¹

Third, Michael Polanyi, a recent philosopher in the evolutionary liberal tradition, developed the concept of "tacit knowledge" characterized by an "in-dwelling" which is the necessary foundation for all explicit knowledge. Polanyi's conception of tacit knowledge is a model of gestalt perception. I have argued Polanyi's concept helps extend the biocentric ethic rooted in Hume and Smith into an ecocentric ethic in harmony with the work of Leopold and Naess.²

My argument for a natural harmony existing between evolutionary liberal and ecocentric thought can be challenged in one obvious way. All liberal traditions endorse the basic modern institutions of the market, science, and liberal democracy. These institutions have repeatedly run roughshod over the natural world, and over peoples whose way of life is more in harmony with the natural world than is our own. How then can I argue for a root harmony? In this paper I want to answer this objection by outlining the framework for a liberal political economy that is in harmony with ecocentric perspectives.

Respect in Community Context

To summarize one conclusion from my earlier work, the fundamental foundation for ethics as people actually experience it is respect, which can be philosophically derived from the work of Hume and Smith. The term 'respect,' however, is fairly vague. The form it takes is decisively shaped by the kind of community within which we act. What constitutes respect in one context may not do so in another.

Liberal society is a community of strangers. In a mass society numbering from hundreds of thousands to billions, there is no way we can have any particular knowledge of most of the people with whom we come into contact. Nor will they have any particular knowledge of us. In such a society, ethical relations based upon a recognition of human equality must be anonymous, procedural, and apply to all. Anonymous because we are strangers to one another, procedural because we have no real idea what one another's particular purposes and goals may be, and apply to all because all of us are equally human beings. Abstract liberal rights are the form respect takes in this kind of society. Among the most important of these rights are freedom of speech, of association, and some sort of private property rights.

What counts as respect among strangers does not necessarily constitute respect among intimates or friends. When arguing with a stranger I can appropriately

invoke my right to freedom of speech. But replying to a lover's reproach over a cutting remark that "I have the right to say what I want" may find our relationship moving from intimacy to one appropriate for strangers. Similarly, if a salesman persistently refers to me by my first name, I may be put off, because it implies a degree of personal knowledge which I know to be absent. But a friend who is very upset with me for some reason might say "Mr. diZerega" rather than Gus. In doing so, my friend intends a message of criticism not respect. Forms of respect are context specific, and what determines the context are the kinds of relationships which most characterize a particular kind of community.

When community is defined in this way, four community forms seem to me particularly fundamental to life in the modern world. First we have the community of the family, which constitutes the basic reproductive unit. As an ideal, it is held together by terms of love, devotion, and responsibility, the form respect takes among intimates. Second is the small face-to-face community, be it a neighborhood, rural county, village, or town. While most residents will lack intimate relations with one another, most will be known to one another as acquaintances or by reputation or having friends in common. In such a community respect takes the form of neighborliness, mutual aid, and friendly relations. Third we have the society of strangers, the liberal order which I have already described. Finally, we have the natural community, which sustains us all. Respect towards relationships in nature is complex because there are two relevant contexts. The first is when we use members of that community for our own purposes, as we must in order to survive. In such instances respect manifests as never treating a being as a pure means.³ There is also the level of our relationships with the natural order as a whole, where we respect the basic processes that sustain it.

It is possible to multiply the number of communities within which we live, but I believe these four are the most basic. Being territorially rooted, they are common to us all, for we are all creatures upon the earth. They also cover the full range of basic relationships we may have with other beings, and therefore the basic contexts within which respect may manifest: intimacy, friendship, and a variety of relationships more characterized by their utility. A full human life today requires participating in all these communities. Understanding their character is necessary if we are to appreciate the problems of liberal modernity's impact upon nature, and possible solutions to it.

Liberal Society's Assault on the Environment

It is clear that as it has evolved, the liberal order tends to respect neither the natural processes necessary for the indefinite flourishing of nature, nor individual plants and animals. To understand why, we need to appreciate liberal modernity's strengths, rather than simply focusing upon its shortcomings. It

turns out that the strengths and weaknesses are connected.

Most fundamentally, the rise of liberal modernity created a new realm for human cooperation, providing strangers with an institutional framework of equal and enforceable rights which facilitated their collaboration for common purposes. The rules governing this cooperation generate a feedback system able to coordinate countless independently chosen projects. The defining liberal institutions of the market order, scientific community, and representative democracy are all self-organizing systems characterized more fundamentally by cooperation than competition.⁴

To take the market as an example, (although democratic politics and scientific research would work just as well) before a business can arise to compete with another, the people comprising it must come together into a fundamentally cooperative endeavor. No organization can last long in a challenging environment if its internal relations are primarily competitive. Organizations whose members suffer from low morale are organizations at risk of failure. Competition between organizations requires cooperation within them.

Competition within liberal institutions is usually poorly understood. The types of interpersonal competition we constantly encounter within contemporary organizations are hardly unique to liberal modernity. Office politics is only a variant of court and bureaucratic politics, and its character would be quickly grasped by a Chinese official from the Han Dynasty. Competition for jobs is nothing new, although the percentage of people in contemporary society who compete in this way is.

The competition which most differentiates liberal society from illiberal social orders arises from the abolition of status differences as a major structural element defining human relations. This abolition vastly increased the range of activities wherein people encounter one another as legal equals. Among equals, relationships survive only so long as both parties find them worth maintaining. A consumer can shift to a new provider at any time. So, for that matter, can supporters of a political party or candidate and scientists who currently favor a particular theory or research program. Any liberal relationship is open to challenge by others offering one of the parties a more favorable alternative. This competition automatically arises out of freedom to choose, and it is the only kind of competition which is systemically unique to liberal societies because it is based upon equality of abstract procedural rights. At the systemic level, this competition constitutes a discovery process, by which conditions most suitable for meeting participants' purposes are found.⁵ Competition in liberal societies is therefore largely a derivative of the cooperation they make possible.⁶

Because liberal societies of strangers require the weakest ties of obligation and responsibility, they maintain the largest range of individual freedom of choice. Such societies are experienced as competitive by any who benefit from the status quo, because it can never be taken for granted. Similarly, they are perceived

as offering potential opportunities by those seeking gain by changing the status quo.

The capacity of liberal societies to promote and harness human creativity through facilitating cooperation gives them a fundamental advantage over societies where the free flow of talent or information is hampered by tribal rivalries, caste status, family feuds, or politically ascribed status differences. Liberal societies therefore generate enormous economic, scientific, and political power. It is this ability to generate power, and not the exploitation of other peoples, which was largely an outcome of that power, that enabled liberal civilization ultimately to dominate the globe.⁷

The power generated by the liberal order also transforms and threatens to overwhelm the other basic communities within which we live. Families, small communities, and nature have all been increasingly integrated into and subordinated to the liberal community, with its abstract and procedural standards. In the process, relationships which are of great benefit among strangers can become a serious threat to human well-being when expanding beyond their appropriate bounds into communities constituted by different kinds of relationships.

We need to understand how the liberal community comes to subordinate other communities if we are to devise means for safeguarding them. The modern liberal order is distinguished by its unusually heavy reliance upon self-organizing systems. Along with custom and language, which exist in any society, liberal societies are characterized by the vital roles played by the self-organizing systems of the market, science, and representative democracy.

In each of these systems, the impact of individual and group action sends signals throughout, enabling others to take into consideration the impact of often far removed actions upon their own plans. A system of constant mutual adjustment is thereby generated. For example, in the market order, changes in the price system signal to people the relative availability of different resources, thereby helping to coordinate their utilization without anyone needing to have a view of the whole. In the scientific community journals and referees play a similar role, making it possible for highly differentiated information to be made available in the absence of any oversight. In democratic politics, the election system sends signals to all interested parties about the success or failure of strategies, policies, and candidates; thereby influencing others in their political actions.

None of these coordination mechanisms is perfect. All rely upon human judgments to perform their function, for the information they generate must be interpreted, and any interpretation can be in error. But they do enable the market, science, and representative democracy to handle more complex information more creatively and in greater service to more human purposes than any alternative form of social order thus far devised.

But systemic strengths can become systemic weaknesses in different contexts. A

self-organizing system works only to the extent that the information it generates and coordinates is relevant to the needs of its participants. If the information it makes available is unreliable, or inappropriate, the results of people freely choosing their own courses of action will more often lead to mutual disruption rather than mutual enrichment.

While liberal self-organizing systems have been reasonably successful at accomplishing these tasks within the liberal community, they have been far less successful at integrating the values and needs of other community types into their coordination system. When other communities were dominant, and the liberal community weak, this was not a serious failing. But as the liberal order has increasingly dominated all other social orders, the picture has become quite different.

The information generated by liberal institutions is different from that needed to maintain other communities. Most importantly, these other communities exist in ethically "deeper" worlds than does the liberal order. Membership in a family makes different, and far more complex, ethical claims upon us than does membership in liberal society. Similarly, the natural community also makes more complex demands of its human members. The reason is that to sustain natural processes we must often pass up opportunities for short term gain, perhaps even postponing them beyond our own life time. In doing so we seek to preserve processes which are largely invisible to us, and which assist people and other beings whom we shall never see. This requires a fairly demanding ethical stance.

The liberal community's ethic is the simplest ethic we encounter. It concerns only procedural relations applicable to all beings like ourselves. It cannot adequately comprehend relationships appropriate to ethically richer communities.

For example, to be indefinitely sustainable, extractive industries such as fishing, logging, whaling, and farming, have to be harmoniously integrated not just with human communities, they must also be in harmony with the natural community. Since natural processes sustain such activities over the long run, harmony with these processes is more important than harmony with a particular human community. This means that human communities need to provide ways of molding people's perceived self-interest in ways that will respect the very long time-horizons (from a human point of view) required to sustain the natural order. In many earlier societies religious principles, pride of ownership, community standards, and an ethic of responsible husbandry all played a role in integrating human oriented production into the larger natural order.

Unfortunately, as these extractive activities become more integrated into the liberal order, they become subordinated to market and politically generated processes which take a much more short term perspective, leading to the decline of forest lands, soil, fisheries, and whales. To take but one example, as farming becomes more mechanized farmers find their freedom of action increas-

ingly constrained by the financial payments they must continually generate in order to repay loans taken out to purchase capital goods. In the short run, agriculture becomes more subordinated to the rate of interest than to natural processes. To preserve and enhance financial capital, too often "natural capital" is used up.

Short as the time horizon of the market rate of interest is from a natural perspective, it is eternity itself compared to political time horizons. Most politicians are ruled by the electoral cycle, and most bureaucrats by the fiscal year, when making decisions and determining policies. In addition, while far-sighted policies usually do not provide profit opportunities for their advocates (else they would not be called far-sighted), their on-going implementation will provide such opportunities to those in a position to benefit. Consequently, there will always be a tendency for far-sighted measures to be subverted over time into serving the short term interests of strategically organized groups. This is why liberal democracies can often adopt a far-sighted policy, but succumb to very short term criteria when implementing it.

There are both ethical and structural elements to this problem. While in its proper context liberalism is a highly ethical system, when its ethics come to dominate other communities it dilutes and erodes the ethical context of human action. For example, if I "own land," I may seek to make my living from it, but I will often also feel at home in it, desire to act responsibly with regard to it, want to leave it in better condition than when I began, and even come to love it. Nor need I be a philosophical ecocentrist to feel these things. They are common to many people.

But if I own shares in a corporation which owns that same piece of land, the ethical richness of my relationship with the land is truncated. To a very large extent, my interest in owning shares is narrowly financial. After all, there is little other reason to buy. If the shares I own are in a mutual fund, this relationship becomes even more abstract and dominated by financial considerations because I will be largely unaware of any other considerations. I have no ethical relationship at all with the land.

Green mutual funds qualify my point, but do not change it. Their very existence testifies to the fundamentally external relationship of environmental ethics to the market order. Environmental ethics have to be deliberately structured into the market process.

While the ethics of personal responsibility and stewardship and the ethics of liberal economics are both legitimate, one is much thinner than the other. This is why liberal ethics makes it so easy for strangers to cooperate, because it minimizes the depth of agreement they need to have. It also leads to abuses.

When it was family owned, California's Pacific Lumber Company logged its land at a slow and sustainable rate, maintaining both forests and logging communities

dependent upon those forests. It simultaneously enjoyed the respect of the environmental community and was an economically viable player in the larger liberal economy. But in purely economic terms, Pacific Lumber was "under valued." It was therefore vulnerable to a takeover by financiers interested in more rapid money making than was taking place. Charles Hurwitz did so, financing his take over by then doubling the logging rate. On purely economic terms, Hurwitz would be said to have acted not only appropriately, he also acted for the benefit of the economy as a whole.

But the economy is only a viable standard for the abstract liberal community, and even then not the sole standard, for it neglects political values. It is a deeply inadequate standard for other human communities, and for the world of nature. In the case of Pacific Lumber, institutional forms able sensitively to evaluate the complex ethical requirements of multi-dimensional relationships with the natural community and various human communities was replaced by institutional relationships able at best to handle only the thinner ethical environment of the liberal community.

The solution to this problem, if one can be found, is not to eliminate the liberal order, which has brought many goods to humankind. Our strategy instead should first, seek ways to strengthen the influence of ethically deeper communities *within* the liberal order and, second, enable the other basic communities of family, the face-to-face community, and nature to preserve their fundamental *separation* from that order.⁸ Such communities need to have countervailing power, to be able to push back at the borders, where different communities interpenetrate with one another.

Property Rights

Property rights define power relations. They serve to settle, and even more to avoid, disputes over alternative uses to which resources may be put. Their existence is inescapable among beings such as ourselves who are social and individually self-conscious. Liberalism emphasizes that private property rights are under most circumstances the most appropriate form these rights should take in order to maximize human well being.

Enforceable property rights are perhaps the strongest tool by which the politically and economically weak can withstand the powerful. The far greater environmental degradation occurring in illiberal industrial societies demonstrates the importance of preserving sources of private power and initiative. That property rights are also used to justify environmental exploitation should not blind us to the more positive dimension of this institution.

Even so, while liberalism has been perhaps the strongest cultural and political force against the arbitrary power of one person exercised over another, it has

preserved one area where this power is considered all but sacred: the ownership of property. Sir William Blackstone observed "There is nothing which so generally strikes the imagination and engages the affections of mankind as the right of property; or that sole and despotic dominion which one man claims and exercises over the external things of the world, to the total exclusion of the right of any other individual in the universe."⁹ Despotic power is irresponsible power. Despots are accountable to no one in how they exercise their will.

While personal property, such as a television or clothing, may be able to be defended in these terms, no liberal theory of private property in land supports this despotic interpretation of property use. Perhaps the most abstract and individualistic theory of private property in land was that developed by John Locke. But even Locke supported private ownership of land only so long as "at least where there is enough and as good left in common for others."¹⁰ It is clear today that this is no longer the case, leaving Lockean property rights open to substantial social regulation. Even from a Lockean perspective, there can no longer be absolute property rights to act in ways that undermine the ecological vitality of forests, rivers, lakes, farmland, estuaries, and the like.¹¹

Arguments from the evolutionary liberal perspective are even more powerful. An ecology is like the liberal order in that its structure is the unplanned outcome of the independently pursued activities of its constituents. One implication which follows is that while both systems will tend to provide optimal environments for the flourishing of the greatest variety of participants, they will often appear sub-optimal from the narrow perspective of any particular participant. Most deer would probably prefer the absence of deer-eating predators, no matter how important they may ultimately be for maintaining a good environment for deer as a species. Economically, virtually any one can imagine a better arrangement of goods and services than the one which confronts him or her in daily life. Politically, all of us can probably imagine better policies on nearly anything than what democratic governments actually pursue. The logic of evolutionary liberalism suggests we be very circumspect about acting to change this order, and seek to do so only on the basis of principles internal to it.

Among human beings, the imperfections of any actual circumstances lead to the temptation to try and attain a favored outcome through extra-systemic interventions, such as price controls in the economy. Ultimately, however, such interventions disrupt the feed back which sustains the system, helping independent people to coordinate their activities without the intervention of a central authority. The richness and vitality of the over all order suffers as a result.

This is why F.A. Hayek argued that political expediency almost always exaggerated possible benefits while it underestimated the harmful impact of extra-systemic interventions needed to attain those benefits. In its underlying logic, Hayek's argument is identical with ecological arguments to resist temptations to impose an outcome on natural processes rather than working with them. In social policy, Hayek emphasized that such cautionary principles should al-

ways trump expediency.¹² The same point holds for our relationship with our environment - for the same reasons.

Property rights in land should be completely divorced from the fiction that makes them conceptually equivalent with property rights in manufactured goods. As even Locke acknowledged, the two are not equivalent. In owning land we in fact own a bundle of discrete rights which can be added to or subtracted. We do not abolish "property rights" by harmonizing this bundle with environmental realities. Thus, there should be no right to indulge in extractive use of a sustainable resource in ways that impair its indefinite renewal. Nor should there be a right to cause or materially contribute to the extinction of a species that is not actively harmful to human beings, such as the smallpox virus. Nor should products be created which can not be either recycled or biodegrade within a reasonable time back into elements useful for other forms of life.

Making users of land accountable to these principles would no more destroy liberal society than did the abolition of slavery, even though it, too, ended a property right of immemorial antiquity. Indeed, like the abolition of slavery, it would be a step forward for a liberal order, as the realm of arbitrary power was limited still further. Such a change would not in itself make liberal society fully compatible with an ecocentric ethic, but it is an essential step in that process. And such a change is fully implied in the character of evolutionary liberal thought.

Second, historically property rights in the US have been strongly biased on behalf of those who use them in economic production. This may be due to the widespread acceptance of the Lockean argument for property rights combined with the wholesale violation of Indian property rights, a violation justified on the false grounds that native peoples did not modify the land. Whatever the reason, this bias has held as much for publicly held property as for private ownership. Only ranchers can bid for grazing allotments on BLM lands. If the Nature Conservancy outbids ranchers, and tries to retire lands from grazing in order to enhance other values, it will lose its allotment and the allotments again be put out to bid. The same principle applies to contracts on public forests. Only mining interests can file claims on public land. In the US, public values are explicitly subordinated to private interests on most public land.

But as basic human economic needs have been met, and as communication becomes steadily easier, groups with non-economic interests are also attempting to influence the fate of public lands. In doing so, they are consistently treated as second class citizens. Excluded from competing against legally privileged ranching, logging, and mining interests, these groups have been forced into the cruder and riskier strategies of political activism in order to protect the values they cherish. In a final irony, their opponents then claim these groups favor "intrusive government" - when in fact they are among its victims.

These non-economic groups hold a major key to harmonizing liberal institu-

tions with the natural order. Usually they have ethically deeper values than the narrowly economic interests who have traditionally dominated the use of public lands. Such groups range from the Sierra Club, and Earth First! to the Izaak Walton League and Ducks Unlimited. While the economic, political, and technological achievements of liberal society are primarily responsible for making the organization of such non-economic groups possible, liberal social institutions do not presently allow them adequate opportunity to influence the use of public lands. Just as private property rights need to be made less despotic, so public property needs to be made more accountable to the public interest. These groups are part of the means by this goal can be achieved.

Government Lands vs. Public Lands

For many reasons, most people are unwilling to entrust all social issues and values to the workings of private markets. Certain values are considered to be ill-served by the market order and are in principle inappropriate for private enterprise to provide. National parks and national forests embody such values. I will focus on their preservation because they encompass both using a forest to provide resources for the human community, and also protecting natural communities for their own sake. The basic principles involved in addressing these issues can be applied to other areas of conflict between nature and human society, as we will see through analyzing the protection of endangered species.

We have appropriately sought to turn ownership and management of national forests and parks over to the public. In practice this has meant that we have turned our forests and parks over to the government for safekeeping. Unfortunately, once given this task government has not acted very responsibly.

To be sure, government action was needed to remove certain values from the not so tender mercies of the extractive industries. It would not have been done otherwise. But the government itself has proven to have been at best an indifferent steward once their preservation became its ongoing responsibility. This situation puts many environmentalists between a rock and a hard place. On the one hand they do not favor privatization. On the other, they do not like the way democratic government and its managing bureaucracies have acted either.

The basic problem with democratic government is that, due to its power to make laws and collect taxes, those with greatest access to political power can use it to benefit themselves at the public's expense. The history of the American West is one long exercise of this tendency, from the initial dispossession of the Indians to the ongoing enrichment of agribusiness. Those standing to benefit financially have tended to exercise disproportionate influence over managerial decisions in both national forests and parks. Unfortunately, there are sound structural

reasons to believe this state of affairs will not change so long as government is charged not only with making decisions to protect non-economic values, which it can do, but also with implementing these decisions over time, which it cannot. Short as the market order's time frame is, it is greater than that applying in politics.

'Democratic government' is not a synonym for the public. It is simply an institution charged with serving public interests, and like any other institution, it can do its task well or ill. In the case of our environment, government has tended to do its task ill. Consequently, any successful environmental strategy must remove publicly owned resources from the day to day managerial authority of a Congress captivated by pork barrels and the electoral cycle, and a bureaucracy more concerned with maintaining institutional turf and autonomy than serving the public. This task is not nearly so utopian as it seems. Once we decouple the public from the government, our thinking is freed, and exciting new possibilities emerge.

Take our national forests as an example. What if for each national forest, a National Forest Trust was established with responsibility for governing it? Membership in this trust would be voluntary, requiring a person to pay a fee covering membership expenses in order to join. Such expenses would not be high, but would ensure that only those genuinely interested in the forest and its fate would take the time to join. Upon joining, members could participate in selecting the trust's board of directors. Trusts would be organized somewhat like cooperatives rather than corporations. The vote of each member would count the same.

Each forest trust would probably have thousands of members. Some would be local residents, some would be involved in extractive industries, some would be people making recreational use of the forest, and some would be people who are concerned with its well-being, even if they had never been there. Quite possibly, a process of proportional representation would give the wide variety of legitimate interests representation on the Board of Directors. Elected directors would be under intense pressure to serve all or most interests which have legitimate claims upon the forests. It would be all but impossible to keep key decisions quiet.

Management of the forest would be the trust's responsibility, which would include raising enough money to meet its costs. Lack of access to tax monies would eliminate any incentive to subsidize extractive industries, as is currently the case. The forest would have to meet its overhead, but would be under no institutional incentive to make a significant profit. It would of course remain influenced by economic forces, but because votes are not weighted by financial influence, economic motives become only one among many influences, rather than the guiding principle in deciding policy.

This forest trust will represent a true public interest. It is open to all. It makes use of modern society's capacity for enabling even widely dispersed people with

common interests to organize effectively for their own purposes. It is difficult to imagine management becoming divorced from its constituency under such circumstances, because some organizations will always monitor what is happening, and people who use the forest will be able to observe for themselves the impact of managerial decisions. The constant renewal of the directors through public debate and elections where contrasting visions compete for the allegiance of voters deeply concerned with the forest's fate would prevent the rise of self-serving elites and in-grown administrations. Having a say in the fate of a forest for which we care would encourage members to become educated on forest issues. This is particularly the case because they are self-selected.¹³

Because there would be many trusts, each with responsibility for only one forest, the membership of each would be focused in its interests. In addition, the inevitable errors in policy will be confined to a single area, while successes will be able to be copied in many others. This decentralization will also encourage the exposure and correction of errors as they are discovered. Such an institutional arrangement maximizes the advantages of having a multiplicity of decision making centers, while using this same characteristic to minimize the impact of poorly chosen policies.

National forest trusts will provide a far more genuine expression of the public interest over time than can Congress. When we vote for politicians, we almost always only have two real choices. Neither may be concerned with issues that motivate us the most. In addition, it is often difficult to monitor how well they actually serve us. Key votes are often on amendments, and are often in committee. A legislator's final vote is a very imperfect way of determining their real position. While not entirely corrupt, Congressional oversight is biased towards serving well-organized interests with strong financial interests. Cooperatively organized national forest trusts promise to be superior in every way.

National parks could be governed by similar trusts. The chief difference would be the virtual absence among the membership of people in the extractive industries, because their use of park lands is already prohibited by law. A slightly different possibility for structuring such a trust from the one I have outlined for the forests has been developed by Karl Hess for Rocky Mountain National Park. "The park," Hess writes, "would be held in trust for the American people by employees of Rocky Mountain, faculty representatives from Colorado's principal colleges, and concerned shareholders drawn from the general public."¹⁴

Such trusts would be genuinely public, democratic, and far less susceptible to the kinds of corruption which have devastated much of our forest land and degraded much of our park land. Their mass membership and the organizations concerned with overseeing their functioning would help protect them from interference by Congress. Once established, they would quickly acquire a legitimacy far beyond that of the self-serving politicians who now exercise partisan and corrupt oversight over the public lands. The public would finally be far more consistently served than is the case today.

While members would not own the forests and parks, in other respects these trusts would resemble cooperatives. Because members are self-selected, and interested in the forest, the advantages of cooperative ownership would largely apply. This provides grounds for optimism. Cooperatives have proven able to take very long-term points of view. In Japan and Switzerland, where the relative absence of foreign invasion has made it possible for traditional institutional forms to survive for centuries local cooperatives have managed to maintain community forest and grazing land for as long as 800 years; longer than the time it takes to establish an old growth forest.¹⁵

Endangered Species

The same principles can be applied to even more intractable issues. For example, many endangered species will not necessarily be saved by wise use of public lands. Key populations exist on private land. Even if no one has a right to contribute to the destruction of a species, a purely punitive approach to enforcing this right has generated serious hostility among many landowners and, far worse, has not encouraged private landowners to *increase* the population of rare species on their property. Obviously, any long term recovery of a species requires not only that its surviving population not be exterminated, in addition the viable population must be re-established, so that inevitable chance environmental fluctuations will not do them in, as happened with the heath hen.

Among liberal insights is the vital one that among human beings incentives motivate better than prohibitions. The procedural rules that generate self-organizing processes are enabling rules, not prescriptive rules. This is why they can successfully channel local knowledge and opportunities in ways beneficial to the system as a whole. By contrast, centralized and technocratic approaches ignore local insights and knowledge because they are too complex to be factored in to some central plan. Yet current endangered species protection, while better than nothing at all, is largely based upon a strategy of prohibitions. It often sets local interests at war with broader social interests. Inevitable tensions become unnecessary antagonisms. An approach emphasizing incentives would look quite different.

Among the best proposals using incentives to attain endangered species recovery is establishing a national biodiversity trust fund. John Baden and Tim O'Brien suggest that such a fund should have "regional, state, and local member organizations Each fund would be managed by a board of trustees and would have as its key mandate, the conservation of species and habitat." A Biodiversity Trust Fund could be funded by foundations, private donations, corporate contributions, a percentage of the revenues from activities on public lands that infringe on wildlife habitat, and check offs at tax time. Baden and O'Brien argue that allocating 10

Like national forest and park trusts, biodiversity trusts would be decentralized, and therefore able to focus on the flora and fauna of local bioregions. This strategy would encourage local concern and support for species and ecosystems close to home. The Biodiversity Trust Fund proposal emphasizes the advantages of using incentives to draw upon widely dispersed knowledge and local involvement in the protection and enhancement of habitat for endangered species. As such, it builds upon the evolutionary liberal insights about the dispersed nature of practical knowledge and the need to cultivate its development and elaboration, rather than seeking to replace it with centralized direction.

Smaller Human Communities

All liberal thought has emphasized that appropriate institutions can serve ethical values which need not be present in the motives of those acting within them. The US Constitution relies upon office holders seeking to expand the powers of their own offices in order to maintain the separation of powers. The market serves broad public needs even though most participants seek to provide only for their own and their loved ones' well being. Science depends upon competition among scientists pursuing their own research interests to facilitate research by other scientists on different problems. Unfortunately, the tendency for liberal theory to celebrate the value of abstractness, and the self-organizing capacities of its defining institutions, has led many to assume that proper institutional constraints are all that we need to channel self-interest in beneficial directions.

In the absence of deeper individual ethics, there are limits to how far even the most impersonal liberal institutions can go in serving the common good. As James Madison and Thomas Jefferson both emphasized with regard to the US Constitution, the self-interest of politicians alone would not preserve it. Parties are also needed to refrain from pushing the outermost limits of their powers.¹⁷

There is a broader principle at work here. If empathy is the foundation for ethical action, then ethical principles applying at high levels of abstraction will need reinforcement and support by communities where values are more personally and tangibly grounded. We can hardly be ethically reliable at such an impersonal level if we are blind to ethical demands in concrete situations - unless forced to be so by the threat of severe sanctions.

When standards of personal integrity which arose and are maintained primarily in face to face societies erode as these communities decline, increasing amounts of resources need to be devoted to enforcement and protection. Our plague of lawyers is evidence of this. The liberal order may not exactly collapse in the absence of an ethical foundation which cannot be derived simply from the rules governing a society of strangers, but it will be impoverished and the quality of human life degraded. This is yet another way of reminding even the most

optimistic liberal that this community is only one of the communities in which we live. Liberal institutions are not truly self-sufficient. They depend upon and benefit from other basic human communities. But to do so, smaller communities with deeper ethical environments must not be subsumed into and dissolved within the liberal community. They need to be able to preserve their own boundaries.¹⁸

These smaller communities constitute the human groups which act within and often preserve a deeper ethical environment than is the case within the abstract liberal society. Their members are called upon to make more discerning ethical judgments than are corporate executives. Because our interface with the natural world calls upon ethical norms which are not inherent in the principles governing the abstract liberal order, local communities will play a vital role in any sustainable liberal society, let alone one which is respectful of ecocentric values.¹⁹

This observation has important policy implications. For example, rather than seeking to use the government to regulate ranchers, environmentalists would probably be far wiser to support and expand programs such as those developed by the Nature Conservancy in areas as diverse as northern California, the greater Yellowstone ecosystem, and the *malpais* country of southwestern New Mexico. In these locations the Conservancy is cooperating with innovative ranchers in devising ranching practices which can coexist with healthy natural ecosystems. Once these methods have been perfected, local communities will be far more easily wedded to a land ethic than will regulatory bureaucracies subordinate to Washington's political agendas. Further, as with national forest and park trusts, the decentralized and diverse character of local communities means more than that local adaptation will be more likely, although it will. In addition, the scale of errors will be limited, while maximum incentives will exist to emulate successes.

Sustainable resource extraction must therefore be encouraged to remain in property arrangements providing richer ethical environments than those characterizing the liberal order alone. From this perspective, family farms are better than corporate farms. Labor intensive production with low capitalization is almost certainly better than capital intensive low labor cost alternatives, for they prevent the farm from being completely subordinated to the rate of interest. Simply removing existing agricultural and forestry subsidies would be a giant step forward in this regard. They might even be sufficient, although I believe further institutional changes would also be needed.²⁰

Conclusion

Liberal institutions have become a threat to the environment largely through their success, not their failure. This success has unleashed so much creative power that most people have become blinded to the fact that liberal institutions and the ethics they exemplify, are not self-sufficient. They are immersed in, and depend upon, a deeper context, one including other communities which are sustained by different, but complementary, ethical rules and principles.

Only when these other communities are given their due, and enabled to maintain themselves as essential parts of the world within which we live, will the liberal order itself become indefinitely sustainable. Like adolescents with more energy than sense, and naive views of their own immortality, liberal civilization has acted as if its desires were the be all and end all of human and natural existence alike. Like such adolescents, attitudes which at one point served a valuable purpose in encouraging growth and creativity can become self-destructive if not moderated by a growing sense of responsibility and embeddedness in more complex relationships with others possessing equal value and standing.

Ecocentrism is needed to better comprehend our embeddedness and responsibilities. Ecocentrism has its roots in human self-consciousness. Its earliest manifestations are in the ethical framework of hunting and gathering societies, as we have come to understand them. Ecocentrism is in harmony with the world's major spiritual traditions. And it is implied in the very foundations of evolutionary liberal thought. Ecocentrism plays a vital role in helping to more fully delineate the broader natural community within which liberal modernity exists, and on which it depends. In addition, it demonstrates that far from being the ultimate derivation of ethics, liberal conceptions of human rights constitute only a special case, although a very important special case, of broader and deeper ethical insights based upon respect for all beings. When these insights are incorporated into evolutionary liberalism, its anthropocentric blinders fall away, and human beings are once again enabled to be at home on this Earth.

Notes

1. Gus diZerega, Individuality, Human and Natural Communities, and the Foundations of Ethics, *Environmental ethics*, 17:1, Spring, 1995, 23-37.
2. Gus diZerega, Deep Ecology and Liberalism: The Greener Implications of Evolutionary Liberal Theory, *The Review of Politics*, 58:4, Fall, 1996.
3. Richard Nelson, *The Island Within*, (New York: Vintage, 1991) and J. Baird Callicott, Traditional American Indian and Western European Attitudes Toward Nature and American Indian Land Wisdom? Sorting Out the Issues, both in

In Defense of the Land Ethic: Essays in Environmental Philosophy, (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989), 177-219.

4. Gus diZerega, Democracy as a Spontaneous Order, *Critical Review*, 3:2, Spring, 1989, 206-240; Elites and Democratic Theory: Insights From the Self-Organizing Model, *The Review of Politics*, 53:2, Spring, 1991, 340-372.

5. F. A. Hayek, Competition as a Discovery Procedure, *New Studies in Philosophy, Politics, Economics and the History of Ideas*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 179-190.

6. This conception of competition has been independently developed within environmental philosophy by Holmes Rolston, III. See in particular, Duties to Ecosystems in *Companion to A Sand County Almanac*, J. Baird Callicott, ed., (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1987), 246-274; and his *Environmental Ethics: Duties to and Values in The Natural World*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), 162-176.

The chief difference between competition and cooperation in nature and in the liberal world is that in nature competition between different individuals tends to benefit both their respective species and often the number and complexity of environmental niches. In liberal institutions there is still another level of cooperation, that between human beings which thereby form organizations whose competitive relations tend to benefit both the quality of the tasks they pursue and the overall complexity and variety of the self-organizing system within which they participate.

7. Fortunately, as these societies became progressively more liberal, the legitimacy of colonial domination eroded. Indeed, even during their imperialistic periods, liberals tended to be the staunchest anti-imperialists. Bernard Semmel, *Imperialism and Social Reform: English Social Imperial Thought 1895-1914*, (New York: Anchor, 1968) 252-253.

Liberal principles were turned against the colonialists by their subjects. In many instances colonies were freed without the need for revolutionary violence. Whatever the merits of complaints about 'neocolonialism,' it is far less controlling than colonialism was.

8. This is not the place to sing praises of liberal civilization. However, I cannot resist from mentioning that it shows signs of eliminating one of the worst scourges in human and environmental history: war. Liberal democracies have never waged war upon one another, and they are the only form of government where this can be said. Further, there are powerful systemic reasons why liberal democracies, and only liberal democracies, will continue to be exceptionally peaceful in their relations with one another. See Gus diZerega, Democracies and Peace: The Self-Organizing Basis for Peace, *The Review of Politics*, 57: 2, Spring, 1995, 279-308.

9. William Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, 1st ed., (1765-1769; reprint, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 2:2. Quoted in Theodore Steinberg, *Slide Mountain: Or the Folly of Owning Nature*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995) pp. 13-14. See also Robert S. Michaelson, *Dirt in the Court Room: Indian Land Claims and American Property Rights*, in David Chidester and Edward Linenthal, eds., *American Sacred Space*, (Indiana University Press: Bloomington, IN, 1995) especially p. 64.
- 10 John Locke *An Essay Concerning the True Original, Extent, and End of Civil Government* (2nd Treatise on Government) Chapter 5, Sec. 27.
11. See Mark Sagoff, Takings, Just Compensation, and the Environment, *Upstream/Downstream: Issues in Environmental Ethics*, Donald Scherer, ed., (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990, pp. 158-179.
12. F. A. Hayek, *Law, Legislation, and Liberty, Vol. I: Rules and Order* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967) pp. 55-71.
- 13 I have benefited immensely from conversations with Karl Hess and Rocky Barker on the idea of national forest trusts. The idea is mostly theirs.
14. Karl Hess, *Rocky Times in Rocky Mountain National Park*, (Niwot, CO: University Press of Colorado, 1993), 112.
15. Margaret A. McKean, Management of Traditional Common Lands (*Iri-aiichi*) in Japan, *Making the Commons Work: Theory, Practice, and Policy* (San Francisco: Institute for Contemporary Studies, 1992), pp. 63-98; Elinor Ostrom, *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 58-69, 88-102.
16. John Baden and Tim O'Brien, Toward A True ESA: An Ecological Stewardship Act, in *Building Economic Incentives into the Endangered Species Act: A Special Report from Defenders of Wildlife*, Wendy Hudson, ed., (Washington, DC: Defenders of Wildlife, 1993), 95-100. See also Randal O'Toole, Building Incentives into the Endangered Species Act, in the same publication, 101-108.
17. James Madison, Government of the United States, *The Writings of James Madison*, Vol. VI., Gaillard Hundt, ed., (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1904) 92-93; Thomas Jefferson to Joseph C. Cabell, Jan. 31, 1814, *The Works of Thomas Jefferson*, Vol. XI, Paul Leicester Ford, ed., (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1905), p. 381.
18. A recent example of what I am talking about was the demotion of a police officer, and the docking of his pay, despite 19 years of good service, because he slapped a young man he found making love to his daughter in his living room. In the abstract liberal community it is never justifiable to strike a person who is doing something of which we may not approve, but which is legal. It is appropriately a crime. But this young man violated every tenet of behaving as a guest

and respecting the family in whose house he was behaving so inappropriately. One need not be a prude to acknowledge that the father was extraordinarily provoked, and that the impersonal standards of the liberal order should for the most part not intrude into the intimate community of the family, save in cases of severe abuse. The officer was completely correct in arguing "This isn't just about me. It's about parents and what their duties and responsibilities are and what they can legally do in their own home." Since the young man suffered no lasting damage, liberal justice should have stayed out. See Kelly Kurt, (AP), Slap Gets Police Dad Demoted, *Santa Rosa Press Democrat*, August 22, 1996, A-10.

The basic insight here is that local communities should be independent in their mostly internal affairs except when their activities significantly injure members' ability either to participate in broader, more inclusive communities; create legal differences in status within political communities; prevent or inhibit people from leaving the community; or subject them to severe harm while they are children, and therefore unable to leave.

19 For example, many residents of the small Appalachian town of Barnardsville, and surrounding communities as well, played a vital role in fighting to preserve one of the largest unprotected old growth forests in the Eastern US from clear cutting. See Kenneth Wapner, Appalachian Trailblazing: A Town of 5,000 Adopts a Forest, *The Amicus Journal*, Winter, 1995, 26-30.

20. Karyn Moskowitz and Randal O'Toole have written a suggestive discussion of how small communities and ranches can cope with today's changing rural environment. See their proposal for Wallowa County, Oregon: *Transitions: New Incentives for Rural Communities*, (Cascade Holistic Economic Consultants: Oak Grove, OR, November, 1993). This text may also be found at <http://www.teleport.com/rot/transits.html> See also Gus diZerega, Saving Western Towns: A Jeffersonian Green Proposal, *Writers on the Range*, Karl Hess, ed., (Boulder: nmUniversity of Colorado Press, forthcoming).

Citation Format

DiZerega, Gus (1996) Towards an Ecocentric Political Economy *Trumpeter*: 13, 4.
<http://www.icaap.org/iuicode?6.13.4.6>

Document generated from IXML by ICAAP conversion macros.
See the [ICAAP](#) web site or [software repository](#) for details