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Capital, Nature & Society (3)

Regulation, Ecology, Ethics: The Red-Green Politics of Alain Lipietz

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Publication date: Sunday 1 September 1996

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3. The Ecological Turn

While this understanding of economic crisis is common among regulationists, this school only takes an ecological turn when Lipietz introduces a new category of analysis into it.

Since 1988, he has argued not only that the various compromises are generating self-defeating behavioral effects, but also that they rely on a strategy of social stabilization that is ultimately incompatible with ecologically responsible economic development. "The era of the finite earth has begun," he warns and even regulationism has not, up to this point, taken theoretical account of this sobering realization. Such an account requires regulation theory to analyze a previously unrecognized premise of 20th-century regimes of accumulation. They incorporate a strategy that Lipietz calls "productivism." They aim at maximizing production and consumption by minimizing community constraints on investment, exchange, patterns of work.

Capitalism always tends toward productivism. Growth is inherent in its logic. One invests in capital for profit, and sustaining profit requires expanding market share. Firms that fail to grow must eventually see their products superseded by competitors bent upon capturing their profits for themselves. Nonetheless, until the mid-20th century, the growth-tendency of capitalism was held in check by the system's own distributive and organizational weaknesses. It concentrated wealth in the hands of a relatively few capitalists, whose ability to consume was necessarily limited. This created crises of commodity and capital overproduction, periodically disrupting the growth patterns of the economy. Inefficient, pre-Taylorist organization of work processes finally slowed increases in productivity.

Although the Fordist compromise admitted some collectivist constraints on economic activity (e.g., channeling some profits into pensions or safety regulations), it did not really challenge productivism. Instead, it perfected it. Giving workers additional income and security, it turned them into consumers capable of absorbing the increased output of scientifically rationalized work processes. Thus, the Fordist compromise removed earlier impediments to economic expansion. Not only could growth accelerate; it had to. "Free enterprise" became responsible for generating sufficient capital to fund not only accumulation and profit, but also higher wages and some of the charges of the welfare state. More than ever, the social logic of productivism prevailed. The stability of such arrangements depended on one key assumption: growth must continue unabated.

The connection with ecological concerns is made when one realizes that the Fordist compromise was a Faustian bargain, trading away the livability of earth's environment. Its productivist premise implicitly denied the finitude of the planet's capacity to supply the raw materials of production and to absorb its waste products. This first became apparent when firms ended up casting off so much waste or so intensively exploiting resources that different enterprises began to interfere with each other's profitability. Problems like the greenhouse effect and pollution of the oceans raised popular awareness that current rates of production and consumption undermine the well-being of future generations. [1] And yet those obliged to clean up their waste complain that such efforts force them to raise prices, diminish production, and cut back employment steps which further weaken the foundation of a regime of accumulation whose stability depends on maximizing production and consumption. Only a new social compromise, Lipietz argues, can resolve the crisis.

Obviously, not just any compromise will do. If we are to mitigate the sources of social instability arising from the exhaustion of Fordism and respect the ecological constraints facing humanity, the new compromise must embody a nonproductivist set of values that can, arguably, settle into a self-reinforcing system. Lipietz identifies those values as

solidarity, autonomy, ecological responsibility, and democracy. [2] These are better understood through concrete proposals than abstract definition. Lipietz's eco-socialist program includes: organizing work relationships so that workers have more control over their activity; increasing leisure time; systematically choosing ecologically sound technologies and recycling; reducing hierarchies in social relations; subsidizing socially-useful, self-organized group activities; promoting grassroots democracy; developing more egalitarian and mutually advantageous relationships between national communities. [3] If the postwar compromise is exhausted in part because technological change has reduced the demand for labor, then a new compromise would combine solidarity and ecological responsibility by more equitably distributing work and free time. If the Fordist regime of accumulation allowed private enterprise to "socialize" the costs of environmental damage in the form of pollution, resource degradation, and destruction of the landscape, then an ecologically responsible compromise must use state taxes, subsidies, and development strategies to restore and protect the environment. Such means, however, usually imply transferring even more power to a bureaucratized, centralized state thereby weakening the value of democracy. To express democracy and ecological responsibility simultaneously, Lipietz proposes fostering political activism by progressive, grassroots organizations. State intervention can be avoided if society is composed of organized interest groups which express their conflicting interests in face-to-face dialogue, arriving at tolerable compromises. [4] At the same time, to counter the destabilizing social and ecological effects of internationally mobile capital, institutions with transnational regulatory powers are needed. Social compromises this time in the form of international agreements are necessary to prevent countries' internal compromises from being undermined by competition to retain or attract investment. [5]

So, the ecological turn in Lipietz's theorizing brings together the regulationist emphasis on the consensual resolution of social conflict with an environmentalist value system one that defends ecologically sustainable development and respect for nature. Yet it is by no means clear how Lipietz has melded explanation and evaluation. Can one derive green values through the same cognitive processes of observation, reasoning and testing that support regulation theory? If so, how? If not, with what sort of argument does one support green values? How do the motivations imputed to social actors in regulation theory tally with the transformed ethics presupposed by a green society? What is the relationship between "compromise" as a variable in regulation theory's explanation of social reproduction and as a legitimating ethical conception ?

Lipietz does not often address such questions explicitly. But when he does, he sounds distinctly Weberian. Regulation theory, he implies, yields explanations that are analytically distinct from the theorist's own ethical convictions. As social theorists, Lipietz says, the task of regulationists is to search for relatively "fixed tracks" in the midst of conflictual group relations. Various social compromises create a relatively enduring system, allowing the theorist to examine the functional interdependence of the ways of organizing work, regulatory regimes, state economic and welfare policies, popular values, and so forth. Evaluation is another matter. "One can have an ethical judgment about a form of social relations," remarks Lipietz, "but no one can say there is something like historical progress..." [6] Apparently, whatever moral judgments the theorist might have about the quality of the compromises whether they are distributionally fair, whether they come at too great an expense in the destruction of nature originate in an ethics devised independently of the process of social change. The theorist can propose ethically superior arrangements. But the ethics are his, not history's. Alternative consensual arrangements will "win" only if taken up by groups willing to struggle for them. Deliberately or not, Lipietz follows Max Weber's injunction: "the investigator... should keep unconditionally separate the establishment of empirical facts... and his own practical evaluations, i.e., his evaluation of those facts as satisfactory or unsatisfactory." [7]

This separation of social and ethical theory does justice to neither. At the ethical level, this interpretation falls short because it fails to justify the values it defends. Liberal productivists have their values; Lipietz and the new social movements put forth different ones. Neither makes its case in terms of superior rationality. The two simply clash in struggle and compromise. But that is not really the form of Lipietz's own arguments for an ecological politics. Throughout *Vert Espérance* he makes judgements that presuppose the comparability of different values and the superiority of green ones. When he characterizes biological diversity as the "immune system of our biosphere," he chooses an image designed to make us all see the folly of wrecking the very system that supports our lives. He denounces distributive systems that allow the wealthy North to capture a disproportionate share of the planet's

resources, disregarding the more urgent needs of the South. He assesses the relative ability of different strategies of economic development to improve the quality of life of all. In all such cases, Lipietz is proposing more than an alternative ethic, which others may or may not find attractive. He is laying out a candidate for a system of values that is more consistent, that better meets our own stated goals, that does not make unwarranted assumptions in a word, that is more rational, in a sense not conveyed in his more Weberian statements.

Equally troubling, by making it seem that the values of an ecological ethics arise in ways that are entirely distinct from cognitive processes of observation, reasoning and testing, Lipietz disconnects his "green" values from the nature of the crisis itself. Ecological challenges do not articulate with human interests in any systematic way, such that one might expect certain conditions of environmental change to favor the development of a "green" consciousness. Demands to protect biological diversity, for example, appear to arise simply because some new social movements decide that it is important not because at this particular historical juncture humankind's species-depleting activities have reached a point where they are particularly likely to activate an interest in the preservation of ecological systems. Lipietz's decisionist model of moral criticism, then, deflects theorists from the important task of explaining the origin of interests or of the conditions favoring their critical re-evaluation.

[1] Lipietz, Choisir l'audace, op. cit., p. 62-64. [\(retour au texte\)](#)

[2] Lipietz, Vert espérance, op. cit., pp. 18-19. [\(retour au texte\)](#)

[3] Lipietz, Choisir l'audace, op. cit., pp. 70-71. [\(retour au texte\)](#)

[4] Lipietz, Vert espérance, op. cit., pp. 28-29. This is not simply American-style pluralism where money, education, and personal contacts are essential for access to power. The "interests" that Lipietz most wants to see organized are those that "pluralism" most often disfavors: the poor, the ghettoized, the environmentally endangered. [\(retour au texte\)](#)

[5] Lipietz, Vert espérance, op. cit., pp. 62, 80. Some argue that the global mobility of capital has reduced not only the power of labor, but also of the state which might call into question the realism of Lipietz's proposal for stronger international accords to regulate capital. See Robert J. S. Ross and Kent C. Trachte, *Global Capitalism: The New Leviathan* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1990). For purposes of evaluating the ethics of regulationism, however, the important point is that the logic of this social theory pushes it to conceive political remedies as negotiated agreements between organized interests, whether the problems are national or international. [\(retour au texte\)](#)

[6] Lipietz, "Rebel Sons," op. cit., p. 22. [\(retour au texte\)](#)

[7] Max Weber, "The Meaning of 'Ethical Neutrality'," in *The Methodology of the Social Sciences*, ed. and trans. by Edward A. Shils and Henry A. Finch (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1949), p. 11. [\(retour au texte\)](#)