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BRUCE JENNINGS

THE ECOLOGICAL CONSCIENCE OF LIBERALISM

There would still remain the never-resting mind,
 So that one would want to escape, come back
 To what had been so long composed.
 The imperfect is our paradise.

—Wallace Stevens, “The Poems of Our Climate”

We rarely think about what makes us possible. Climate change calls upon all those who sleepwalk to wake up—to come clean, so to speak—concerning the harm being done to the natural conditions that make a just and well-ordered society possible. But what about those who are awake—those who are scientists, researchers, writers, teachers, activists, and engaged ecological citizens; those of us who are concerned with environmental or ecological ethics in some way? We understand that the natural world, upon which we all depend, is imperiled. But do we adequately notice the shifting cultural and political ground that is no less essential for our work? Do we unduly take for granted a political morality that makes us possible? Do we understand the peril it is in?

I ask this with some urgency because I believe that the intellectual climate, the mental furniture, that makes environmental ethics as a discourse and as a discipline possible is under assault. This assault—on inclusion, diversity, justice, science, and objectivity—is fundamental and should not be shrugged off as a mere academic dispute or a family quarrel within a special interest community. Environmental ethics must see that the fate of its own discursive integrity is bound up with a much larger struggle to control political language and meaning. Seeing this—or failing to—will make an important difference to the future niche that it occupies in twenty-first century thought, and to the power of its voice in the political debates and struggles that lie ahead.

Consider the history of the American conservation movement, then the environmental movement of the last generation, and now the emerging ecological resilience and earth systems perspectives.¹ Each of these movements contains an animating moral imagination, distinctive in many re-

spects, but overlapping enough that a core vision shared by each of them can be discerned. Let me call it the “ecological conscience.” The ecological conscience is something that is “long composed,” as Stevens puts it, but why should our never-resting minds want to come back to it, preserve it, defend it? All too obviously, it is being set adrift politically in America today, yet, despite that, an ecological conscience is still good to think about and to feel with. It is a drum to which we can still march. I believe that it is still defensible and worth defending, now more than ever.

The ecological conscience stands or falls with the open society itself; its vision and values are entangled with the political morality of a pluralistic and panarchic way of life. That a society with multiple centers of power and rule has come to sustain—and to be sustained by—the values of the web of life is a historical achievement, hard won, of our country.² The future of that achievement is now in doubt.

By an “open society,” I mean three things. First of all, an open society respects individual human rights and interests and is willing to extend them in ways sufficient to grant moral considerability to non-human individuals and systems of life. Second, an open society has a political culture dedicated to a moral style

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of reasonable moderation, compromise, and mutual accommodation. Finally, an open society welcomes diversity and the possibility of creating and sustaining a system of individual privacy, freedom of choice, equality of opportunity, and ordered liberty under law.

In short, an open society holds together a culture that is fluid and pluralistic and a polity that is impartial in its law and just in its democratic deliberation. This is what makes the traditions of ecological conscience and the discourse of environmental ethics possible.

This will be a dubious proposition, even an outrageous one, to those who focus their attention on the more redoubtable face of liberalism and liberal democracy—the face of its capitalism, competitive individualism, unsustainable and damaging economic growth and human consumption, and its human-centered outlook that denies virtually any moral consideration to non-human life and earth systems. Yet I stress another face—a natural, ecological, relational face—that has also been a part of modern liberalism and constitutional democracy. Therefore, liberalism, of thee, nevertheless, I sing.

These two faces may be inseparable, I admit, but our best hope is that they are not. An ecological constitutional democracy can be the better angel of our liberal achievement; it can provide an answering ethical response to the rapacious legacy of nineteenth and twentieth century market liberalism and point the way to a better future of sustainable global development and ecological governance. But this possibility is seriously threatened today by an emerging unholy alliance between neoliberalism (an extreme form of economic liberalism) and nationalistic, authoritarian populism.

POPULISM ON THE RISE

Today a populism that is illiberal and exclusionary is gaining political traction in many parts of the world. An insightful scholar of this phenomenon is political scientist Jan-Werner Müller. He defines populism as follows:

Populism is a particular moralistic imagi-

nation of politics, a way of perceiving the political world that sets a morally pure and fully unified—but ultimately fictional people against elites who are deemed corrupt or in some other way morally inferior... The populist core claim also implied that whoever does not really support populist parties might not be part of the proper people to begin with... The core claim of populism is thus a moralized form of anti-pluralism... Populism arises with the introduction representative democracy; it is its shadow.³

Telling expressions of the moralistic political imagination of populism are easy to find these days, but a particularly instructive and unvarnished example arises in a thoroughly forgettable speech that must not be forgotten. This is the voice found in the gubernatorial inaugural address of Governor George C. Wallace of Alabama in 1963:

In the name of the greatest people that have ever trod this earth, I draw the line in the dust and toss the gauntlet before the feet of tyranny... and I say... segregation now...segregation tomorrow...

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segregation forever. The real America [is] the Great Anglo-Saxon Southland...And you native sons and daughters of old New England's rock-ribbed patriotism ...and you sturdy natives of the great mid-West... and you descendants of the far West flaming spirit of pioneer freedom...we invite you to come and be with us...for you are of the Southern mind...and the Southern spirit...and the Southern philosophy.⁴

For the whole of my adult lifetime, it has been rare to hear national political elites deploy such an openly racist and divisive idiom, and these bowel sounds of the body politic have mostly been quiet. That is changing. Such sentiments have begun to strike a responsive chord once again in America and, no less ominously, in Europe as well.

Consider the significant growth of nationalistic parties in several major European countries such as France, Germany, Poland, and Hungary; the majority vote in the United Kingdom to withdraw from the European Union; and the election of Donald Trump in the United States on a tide of nationalistic populism in 2016. In these countries, political leaders once on the fringe of politics—many of whom are on record with openly racist, anti-Semitic, and fascist viewpoints—have rapidly ascended, due in part to the backlash against the emigration of displaced persons, austerity policies and high unemployment, and other growing social class divisions based on region, lifestyle, educational level, and wealth. To gain power, populist leaders spread disinformation and fuel bigotry. Once in power, they often go on to curtail basic liberties, roll back programs of social welfare support, and reward segments of the citizenry who have become their clients in a regime prone to favoritism, disparity, and corruption.

Populism is not truly democratic. Although it appeals to the demos, the people, it is actually the dark side of representative democracy, as Müller notes:

Of course, it is not just populists who talk about morality; all political discourse is

shot through with moral claims, just as virtually all political actors make...the representative claim...What distinguishes democratic politicians from populists is that the former make representative claims in the form of something like hypotheses that can be empirically disproven on the basis of the actual results of regular procedures and institutions like elections...Democrats make claims about the people that are self-limiting and conceived of as fallible...Populists, by contrast, will persist with their representative claim no matter what; because their claim is of a moral and symbolic—not an empirical—nature, it cannot be disproven.⁵

Populism feeds on the functional failures of democratic representation. It is fueled by discontent with the established social and political order. This is the discontent of competing and always losing. Such discontent undermines self-esteem in a supposedly (but not genuinely) meritocratic society.⁶ Over time, it sours into anger, frustrated expectations, and alienation. Its chronic stress is one of the leading social deter-

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minants of ill health in both the human body and in the body politic.⁷ Large numbers of people lose their sense of investment in the mainstream institutions of politics and civil society.

Populist leaders are quick to seize on these sentiments, cater to them, and reinforce them, but once in power often do not act to address the voters' legitimate concerns. Elected by majorities, populist leaders and parties make claims to representation, but they do not function like democratic representatives. Having ridden in on a movement, knowing who the people are and what they will by acclamation, populists and their leaders have no respect for institutionalized checks and balances and no patience for building an inclusive democratic consensus.

AN UNHOLY ALLIANCE

Why have these movements arisen in the past thirty years or so? This question has been much discussed, to put it mildly. My contribution is the following conjecture. We might see progressive liberalism as under attack from two seemingly disparate, but actually interconnected, quarters: namely, the authoritarian populism I have been sketching and the ideology and institutional practices of a new kind of anti-welfare state, pro-global capitalist liberalism commonly referred to as "neoliberalism."⁸

Populism rejects pluralism, inclusivity, social engineering and welfare ambitions, and the elitist style and tone of progressive liberalism. Its purveyors have discovered the discrepancy between progressive liberalism's abstract ideals and its practical failures to realize those ideals effectively in the political economy (where relative inequality is entrenched, and upward social mobility is stalled) and in everyday life—health, education, housing, and public safety (where discrimination and disparity abound).

Neoliberalism clashes with progressive liberalism on several fronts. It represents an extreme form of competitive-market oriented laissez-faire liberalism reminiscent of the nineteenth century,

before the advent of social insurance systems, public pension systems, health and welfare programs, and the like. Contemporary neoliberalism is fundamentally opposed to state-based and tax-financed social welfare entitlements, and it often proposes the privatization of many core social service programs in education, health, criminal justice, and even the military. It is corporate and oligopolistic in character, using micro-economic models to justify policies that actually restrict market entry, competition, collective bargaining by organized labor, and other policy goals that have been at the core of progressive liberalism.

What I take from this is that when neoliberalism undercuts progressive liberalism structurally, the limitations, flaws, and poison pills embedded in social welfare programs produce the frustrations and the climate of public de-legitimation that fuels much of the political passion and activism of authoritarian populism.

At the heart of the mutual reinforcement of populism and neoliberalism lies inequality. The widespread alienation we see today and the legitimation crisis of liberal democracy cannot be understood apart from the dynamics of social and economic inequality in the last fifty years. Carbon emissions are not the only thing that has un-

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dergone a great acceleration during this period.⁹ This is a long story, but here is its current culmination.¹⁰ Both globally and in the United States, the unequal concentration of wealth in the richest hands is staggering. In America, eight people own as much as the bottom fifty percent of the nation's households. And it has been estimated that the richest sixty-two people in the world have holdings that exceed the bottom half of the global population, about 3.5 billion people.

However shocking, these numbers only provide a snapshot and probably have little impact politically. What people do feel and what moves them is the dynamic change in the concentration of wealth they have experienced in their lifetimes. In the United States the share of national income of the wealthiest 1 percent nearly doubled between 1980 and 2014, from 11 percent to 20 percent, while in the same period the majority of people experienced stagnation in their standard of living. Factors often cited to explain this—such as global competition, advances in technology, decline in union membership, and immigration—do not seem to account for international comparisons in wealth inequality among O.E.C.D. countries. In the United States, the increase in the wealth of the 1 percent has been concentrated in three sectors: professional services, finance, and health care. It seems that the professional and managerial elites in these industries have been very successful in utilizing regulatory barriers that shelter them from income competition by other groups.¹¹ An old saying apparently needs to be amended: the rich are in a position to get richer, and they are very good at it.

Historically it has been the *raison d'être* of progressive social welfare liberalism to mitigate large disparities in the share of national wealth and to offset the structural advantages of some groups. The result has been a policy agenda designed to promote justice defined as equality of opportunity and to provide a safety net of income and services for those in need that ensures a basic minimum of equal dignity and respect. Such policies have

had limited success in normal times—as Thomas Piketty and Walter Scheidel document, truly extensive equalization and redistribution of wealth mainly occurs at times of war or social disruption. But roughly since 1980, the expansion and effectiveness of liberal welfare policies have been blocked politically whenever they began to impinge upon the economic position of strategically placed elites. From the point of view of political legitimacy and unrest, the question to ask is not how wide the relative inequality is in a given society, but rather how the middle and working classes feel about what is available to them with the wealth they have. Political scientist James C. Scott expresses this insight well:

It is difficult to say anything meaningful about relative income without understanding that poverty isn't just about cash and calories. It cannot be treated separately from its cultural context...We are required...to ask not merely what is extracted from a population, but what is available to them...and whether what they have affords them the minimum human and cultural decencies that characterize their society. The Scandinavian welfare

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states owe their stability...to the fact that they provide even the poorest with the resources necessary to maintain their dignity.¹²

The American state has manifestly failed where the Scandinavians have succeeded in this regard. One key event which fueled the rise of authoritarian populism in both the United States and the European Union was the liquidity crisis and the severe recession of 2008–2010. It was made possible largely by neoliberal ideology rationalizing deregulation of the banking industry and securities markets. The populist response grew due to the optics of how financial and governmental elites responded to the crisis and averted a more serious collapse of global finance. In essence, public funds covered the private losses brought on by the recklessness and fraud of institutions that were, as the saying went, “too big to fail.”

Few responsible economists gainsay the fact that the extraordinary fiscal and monetary steps taken by President Obama and the Federal Reserve Board were necessary to avert a major depression. I certainly don't. But I do think that the trickle-down rescue of the economy extracted a heavy price in political legitimacy and inadvertently set in motion a reactionary realignment in the political culture that is only now beginning to be felt. People saw another kind of inconvenient truth besides climate change. If those on Wall Street with toxic assets on their books were covered, who had the back of those on Main Street in their millions, those who lost their homes, their savings, their jobs? Who really counted in our society was revealed in an unusually unvarnished way. When people saw who was too big to fail, they also saw who was too small to matter. Far too many saw themselves.

In this and other ways, progressive welfare liberalism and constitutional democracy have been buffeted by neoliberal policies that have undermined the moral legitimacy of government and by elected officials who have capitalized on populist resentment. Now we have a populist president

with a distinctly nationalistic, exclusionary, and authoritarian style enacting neoliberal policies and being cheered for it by many who eventually will be hurt the most by those very policies.

HOW ECOLOGICAL ETHICS CAN SAVE THE LIFE OF LIBERALISM

What's the way out? I want to name three strategic activities that I believe will be part of the answer: civic learning, civic institutional innovation, and civic participation. All are sorely needed to combat the influence of campaign donations and various forms of information manipulation that are undermining the functioning of traditional representative democracy. Civic participation is deliberative and institutionalized; it relies on civic learning and institutional innovation in order to function properly. It can be an antidote to representation's democratic malaise.

These capabilities do not just happen, and where they exist, they should not be taken for granted. They must be supported and nurtured. The prognosis seems grave. But it is essential not to fall prey to what I called recently in these pages, the “tyranny of no alternatives.”¹³

Cultural framing and social power set the terms and possibilities of civic learning. They inform the convictions and contentments that indi-

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viduals pursue in their everyday lives. But frames are changeable and power is fluid. America's capacity for practical and institutional civic learning determines how wide a gap there will be between its normative ideals and its actual practices. With civic learning that gap will narrow; without it, in a time of disagreement and conflict-generating communications and worldviews, the gap will widen. Indeed, at such times the content of those normative ideals—freedom, equality, justice, and mutual respect and care—may itself erode and morally degrade, as when freedom becomes exclusionary or when mutuality embraces only those who are alike.

We need to increase the flow of civic messages and discourse before we can increase people's civic attention span and transform attention into attentiveness. Such discourse production requires support and an infrastructure of its own. It requires expensive and time-consuming research and preparation, as well as multiple venues of learning communities engaged in critical examination and debate. One would think that universities and private research institutes might serve civic goals in this way, but the former seem reluctant to engage and the latter have for the most part positioned themselves to engage in the partisan activity of offering controversy-generating rather than consensus-building content.

Democracy in a time of populist ascendancy relies on the capability of citizens to focus on how interests they all share can be defined and fulfilled as common purposes. And it requires their ability and willingness to understand what such interests mean through mutual dialogue with others. The answering response to populism's moralistic imagination of politics is a relational and pluralistic turn, an enabling act of political and moral imagination affirming solidarity, membership recognition, and mutual respect.

The discourse of environmental ethics cannot supply that answering response alone, the entire political morality of our discourse, deliberation, and argument must be brought to bear on that. But

we whose writing, teaching, and activism is informed by a conservation, environmental, and ecological conscience can contribute vital voices to a re-affirmation of the liberal democratic tradition and political culture that makes us possible.

Bruce Jennings is Senior Fellow at the Center for Humans and Nature and Editor-in-Chief of *Minding Nature*. His most recent book is *Ecological Governance: Toward a New Social Contract with the Earth* (West Virginia University Press, 2016).

NOTES

- 1 J. Purdy, *After Nature: A Politics for the Anthropocene* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).
- 2 Here I intend to echo Richard Rorty's powerful statement in *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth Century America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).
- 3 J.-W. Müller, *What Is Populism?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 19-20.
- 4 G.C. Wallace, "The Inaugural Address of Governor George C. Wallace, January 14, 1963, Montgomery, Alabama," at <http://digital.archives.alabama.gov>. Quoted by Müller, *What is Populism?* p. 21.
- 5 Müller, *What Is Populism?* pp. 38-39.
- 6 R. Sennett and J. Cobb, *The Hidden Injuries of Class* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1972).
- 7 R. Wilkinson and K. Pickett, *The Spirit Level: Why Greater Equality Makes Societies Stronger* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2009) and M. Marmot, *The Status Syndrome: How Social Standing Affects Our Health and Longevity* (New York: Henry Holt, 2004).
- 8 For a general overview see D. Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).
- 9 J.R. McNeill and P. Engelke, *The Great Acceleration: An Environmental History of the Anthropocene since 1945* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).
- 10 See T. Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014) and W. Scheidel, *The Great Leveler: Violence and the History of Inequality from the Stone Age to*

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the Twenty-First Century (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017).

11 J. Rothwell, "Myths of the 1 Percent: What Puts Some People at the Top," *New York Times*, November 24, 2017.

12 J. C. Scott, "Take Your Pick," *London Review of Books* 39, no. 20 (October 19, 2017): 23-24.

13 B. Jennings, "The Tyranny of No Alternatives," *Minding Nature* 10, no. 1 (January 2017), 3-12.