



Democracy and Global Warming

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As Holden argues, climate change is clearly a global problem whose solution seems to require unprecedented political coordination at a trans-national level. The fact that the policies needed to ameliorate the effects of global warming will impinge dramatically on the lifestyles of those most responsible for producing greenhouse gases also raises significant questions about whether such changes can be effected democratically. Will people be willing to actively support decisions that are likely to reduce their current 'quality of life' for uncertain benefits which may only accrue years from now? Given the urgency of the situation, the prevalence of short-term self-interests and the apparent impracticalities of democracy on a global scale, one might expect a resurgence of an environmentally justified authoritarianism. Yet, as Holden admits, the influence of those seventies theorists like Hardin, Heilbroner and Ophuls, who argued for a variety of reasons that expert opinion is a better arbiter of global environmental policy than the people's voice, has waned. Democracy, we are told, is now widely accepted as 'the best form of government' (p. 113) and 'contemporary green theory may [also] be seen as predominantly democratic' (p. 9).

Holden's book sets out to defend, amend and extend what he perceives as this democratic consensus as the most effective basis for both global environmental polity and policies. After first presenting arguments against environmental authoritarianism, he critiques the case for a more general scientific guardianship before moving on to argue that forms of participative and deliberative democracy can actually help mobilize consent to 'legitimize [the] potentially unpopular decisions' (p. 82) necessary to tackle global warming. It 'is *only* democracy that can overcome people's initial unreadiness to support tough policies' (p. 2). Holden's solution is not a form of global government but the democratizing of global regulatory bodies 'as part of a global system which could be described as a democratic global civil society incorporating a system of global governance' (p. 154). Holden is, however, extremely vague about the exact form this system might take and just how it could be guaranteed to be 'responsive to global popular demands' (p. 154), though INGOs do seem to be accorded a prominent role. Instead he concentrates on quite abstract theoretical



arguments meant to demonstrate *a priori* that such a system should be better than its alternatives.

This is I think indicative of a number of problems with Holden's text. Even for a work of political theory it operates at such a level of abstraction that, despite its title, the specifics of 'global warming' often seem almost incidental to its philosophical concerns. Certainly those readers looking for an intricate analysis of the links between what currently passes for the 'democratic' process and policies on global warming will be disappointed. This abstraction is evident in other ways. Strangely, for someone so supportive of deliberative democracy, he rarely engages directly with the voices of those contemporary environmentalists who challenge or support particular, and often incompatible, forms of democratic theory and practice.

Here he might have found plenty of allies and villains to give substance to questions about global environmental democracy. He might, for example, have uncovered commonalities with George Monbiot, or discussed the radical critique of currently existing 'democracy' in the writings of green anarchists, bioregionalists or deep ecologists. He might also have engaged with contemporary theorists supportive of scientific/philosophic guardianship like Laura Westra (1998). Unfortunately, such people are mentioned only briefly if at all and almost always through the lens of other political theorists like Barry, Dahl and Dobson who deploy their writings in much more innovative and effective ways. For example, Irwin's (1995) *Citizen Science* presents a far superior account of the troubled relation between scientific expertise and democratic accountability.

Environmental problems like climate change certainly do raise fundamental issues for democratic theory. Holden is, for example, willing to consider the case for including future generations (who might suffer the consequences of our environmental inactivity) as part of a democratic 'intergenerational community at some length. However, many greens question the legitimacy of contemporary democratic institutions precisely because of their limited focus on representing human interests. Their vision of the 'communal' good extends beyond human subjects to include members of a wider non-human community. Holden recognizes that the 'inclusion of "other species" is a typical feature of green democratic theory' (p. 26) yet relegates this issue to a footnote. While the way in which such non-human interests might be *represented* may indeed be 'controversial', the fact that other species and whole ecosystems might be driven to extinction is surely not 'tangential to our [sic] concerns' about global warming. The fact that Holden considers it so might be taken by many greens to illustrate a limit to the mainstream democratic theories he tries to defend.

As an exercise in applied political philosophy Holden's vaguely reformist agenda may have popular appeal but his arguments often take the form of contentious analytic distinctions circumscribed with extended sub-clauses,



constant qualification, and a mass of over-long and unnecessary footnotes. Far from clarifying issues the core argument often gets lost or is constantly delayed into an indefinite future. I lost count of the number of times I was told that ‘questions of two kinds appear here’ followed by ‘I shall take this up in a moment’, ‘the question ... will be taken up later’, ‘I will comment later’, ‘I shall leave them aside for the time being’, ‘Again I shall leave such questions on one side at this point’. This all within a page of text (61–2). Unfortunately, these stylistic problems do little to help establish exactly what Holden’s book adds to either democratic theory or to an understanding of the wider implications of global warming.

References

- Irwin, A. (1995) *Citizen Science: A Study of People, Expertise and Sustainable Development*, London: Routledge.
- Westra, L. (1998) *Living in Integrity: A Global Ethic to Restore a Fragmented Earth*, London: Rowman and Littlefield.

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