

Media and Ecological Consciousness

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Abstract

The concept of 'citizenship' in the age of the ecological consciousness is forced to change, involving a wider perspective on the connections tying together social systems and other entities of the ecological systems they belong to; connections in which dependencies and relations are nested in a complex structure. An old-fashioned preservationist approach appears obsolete or, in any case, insufficient, like some technological utopia, to enclose a new idea of ecological responsibility, not only focused on human needs or interest, producing new perspectives on equity and justice. Beyond the enormous and still unresolved contradictions within social systems, new radical problems appear at the horizon and social institutions have to face them with an apparently inadequate set of tools. Prisoner of the structural limitations of representative systems – like the need for creating and maintaining consensus – and unable to cope with vested interests of economical subjects, national and international institutions have not enough political force and have no choice except that of investing in the diffusion of ecological consciousness, making possible, via a different path, the adoption of needed and even radical resolutions through engagement. An essential help could come from the media system, which may be capable of actively participating in an evolution of the public awareness; but the actual approach to ecological issues is often confined to an attention to catastrophic events with a narrative sometimes describing the result of ecological dynamics as the effect of a mysterious menace, with no human responsibilities. A critical analysis of the way in which ecological issues are treated and a consideration about the presence – or the absence – of a sort of moral duty of media in ecological policies appears therefore necessary.

Key Words: Citizenship, ecological consciousness, social system, ecological system, media system, equity, responsibility, freedom, institutional limitations.

1. Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to offer some considerations tying the changes in the social organisation, required by the present ecological consciousness, with the very intimate core of citizenship. The evidence that a purely conservationist environmental attitude or a mere set of restrictive regulations are insufficient to cope with ecological issues – both because of the conflict it may produce with the reasons for citizenship, and for a lack of power of State institutions – requires different strategies, based on a co-operative engagement of individuals as a mean to trigger a change in their everyday behaviours, otherwise very difficult to obtain.

A strategy not based on the assumption of the citizen as a complete rational actor, but also approaching the more emotional and moral side of his/her reflection, is a path actually followed by governmental institutions and implies a role for the media system.

The analysis of an institutional document on the topic allows us to produce some observations on the purposive use of media, the internal consistency they are required to have and the ethical and practical concerns which may arise. These concerns can be valued as justified, or not, on the base of the subjective perception of the entity and the necessity of the goal to achieve.

2. Human Consociation

Historically the concept of citizenship, as well as human consociation, has been observed under the partial light of an attention merely focused on the human community. What made reasonable and apparently necessary the existence of a community of women and men, organised in a stable form with its own rules and constraints, has been identified in an advantage of the consociated life, respect to a pre-social status.¹ An early perspective originated in Western philosophy and also permeating in the classical sociological theory, with Emile Durkheim who formalizes the idea of an *organic solidarity* linking individuals, considered as a peculiar feature of the evolved human communities.² Indeed, the objects of the political reflection have usually been the life and the well-being of the human fellows belonging to the community; a well-being that concerns *just and only* humankind. No mention of the rest of the existing world is usually present, and when present it is mostly referred to the human opportunity of exploiting it. This point of view found a moral statement and a foundation in the prevailing Western religious narrative in which the existing world is an appendage of humankind – imagined as *the* scope of creation – and environment is seen as a given property to be managed pursuing the goal of the maximum human benefit.³ A narrative in which, as in many others, a consolidated habit in looking at the relation between social and ecological systems from an utilitarian perspective can be easily recognised.

The concept of citizenship emerging from those premises – the right to access nature, the idea of consociation as the way to the supreme collective good, and the idea of a community made just and only by humans – is established on a search for the greater well-being for the larger number, using for this goal *all* the needed resources. Social institutions of modern State pursue and protect this search, in change they find their own legitimacy in the partial cession of sovereignty accepted by individuals. The very idea lying at the base of the welfare state is tailored on such a concept of citizenship: producing the maximum benefit for humans that, per definition, is a ‘net benefit;’ indeed environmental costs are simply not contemplated.

3. The Ecological Age

The emergence of the *ecological thinking* during the 20th century, intending with this expression as a set of ideological and moral assumptions – derived from data provided by ecological science, of which it is a cultural translation – seriously puts under scrutiny the legitimacy of a perspective assuming a net prevalence of the social system respect to the world it belong to.⁴ Not only because the idea of a purely human community seems less and less adequate to describe the increasing awareness of the surrounding reality, but also because the evident tie between human actions and their environmental consequences poses a principle of responsibility and suggests the opportunity for a self-limitation in behaviours and rights that would have been previously simply not conceivable.

The first expression of an attention to the environment took the form of *conservationism*, in which protection was strictly tied with the chance for a future human exploitation; differently *environmentalism*, and more poignantly *ecologism*, promoted preservation in the name of the intrinsic value of the natural environment. But this commitment pursued by a relevant part of the environmental movement has often collapsed in a form of radical preservationism, aimed to the mere preservation of the still existing natural world – or of what is supposed to be *natural*. Further, this perspective often does not focus the intervention on the social system, or just affects marginal features of it, leaving almost untouched the core of social organisation, individual freedoms and consumption habits.

Traditional preservation or slight regulations are ineffective and reforms regarding the economic and productive system are needed as well as interventions directly affecting individual habits. Indeed, nor an unquestioned trust in the results of technological innovation, nor the perspective of an ‘ecological modernization’⁵ are viable,⁶ at least without some form of ‘downshifting.’⁷ The most suitable subject for managing the change would appear to be State institutions but here a number of problematic issues arise, partly tied to the very nature of State, partly due to a possible conflict between this change and the consolidated ideas about citizenship and consociation.

4. Institutions

The State derives its legitimacy from the agreement with which citizens limit their own freedom looking for a more secure social order. But the constraints to freedom are not absolute and this limitation has produced the discrimination between public and private sphere. Here lies a fundamental difference with the policies of the age of ecological consciousness: the control and the interference of institutions may affect a space that has been considered for a long time as external to the state interest and its possibility of action. Some elements seem to suggest the chance for a more active and pervasive State action, very different from the liberal way of thinking about State; the very concept of welfare in an *Ecological State* could deeply change, traversing and exceeding the individual dimension, because

the price of pursuing a diffused well-being would weight on individuals' lives. Now, many obstacles make the role of state complex, confining it in an impasse; among them four major ones may be recalled here: consensus trap, influence of vested interests, State inner contradictions and the need for equilibrium between constraints and advantages of citizenship.

Mostly with regard to democratic systems the problem of the creation and the conservation of consensus is of primary relevance and often it results in an attenuation or procrastination of needed policies. To this element the influence exerted by economic lobbies should be added; an influence to which institutions have largely proved their inability to resist. Even the hypothesis of an 'ecological government' led by technical experts, a maximum rationality option, triggers some concerns, primarily in relation to the appointment of these technicians and their attribution of a political mandate. To this regard, Arne Naess observes how the conclusive answer cannot be found in the work of experts because they often choose the path of confirming what seems to be the *preference of the majority*, in line with democratically elected administrative roles, giving, in essence, birth to a reactionary attitude.⁸ Institutions in representative systems seem to lack the power to implement radical and unpopular reforms, even if those reforms are necessary; a dynamic that can be observed both at national and international level, considering the repeated failure and ineffectiveness of international meetings and commissions. The whole problem may be approximately framed in the concept of *environmental state*, in which 'causing and being responsible for ameliorating environmental problems' puts State in 'an inescapable contradiction,' producing 'an indefinite pattern of ambivalence and internal struggle'⁹ impeding the adoption of policies. Nor mere regulation, without emotive *and* intellectual engagement would probably be successful,¹⁰ in force of the internal conflicts in State institutions and of the frustration that regulation might produce in citizens.

If a strong institutional action regulating production and economical systems, making them compliant with a new set of standard (e.g. moving from a scenario in which consumers are suggested to prefer *green products* to one in which just this kind of products exists) would be the most effective one, it actually appears as something very unlikely to achieve. Apparently, the shortest way for State institutions to perform their tasks and guide the transition toward a more ecologically informed social organisation is a deep change in the perception individuals hold of their condition and of their responsibilities, making environmentally correct behaviour a willing action, stimulated by personal attitude and vocation, more than by a form of civil obedience based on constriction.¹¹ Achieving this would permit institutions to avoid some of the obstacles mentioned above, driving change with citizens, not in spite of them, looking for an 'engaged change.'

5. Media System

A major subject in the effort to produce such a change, with an influence on people's consciousness, evaluations and feelings can be reasonably found in media system. An increasing attention is being paid by institutions to the media system role, and it may be interesting moving from a practical example.

In January 2010 the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (UK) released a note entitled *Climate Change: Engagement and Behaviour*,¹² focused on the way United Kingdom should deal with climate change. In this note a relevant attention is focused on the role that media might play in stimulating and orienting the engagement of civil population.

In the text it is stressed how public engagement is important in implementing policies, 'especially regarding controversial policies';¹³ and engagement also appears as a necessary element for triggering change and avoiding forms of passive resistance or opposition in personal behaviours, a key factor in the reduction of environmental impact. When considering about citizens' engagement it would be an ingenuous mistake considering them just as fully rational actors and decision makers; an assumption that relies on unverified premises and which has proved to be largely ineffective.¹⁴ Mere information might not be a sufficient force to stimulate consciousness and consequent changes in behaviour, also in consideration of the fact that strictly environmental arguments may, or not, be considered as relevant in personal evaluations.

In this sense it is pragmatic to admit that, as shown by a study¹⁵ on the approach people have regarding climate change and other general issues, besides 'engaging' people, profiles like 'denying,' 'uninterested,' or 'doubting' still exist, and they might be the main target of communicative actions; acting just on the base of desirable attitudes would be useless. If information in itself may be not enough to start a change in behaviours, than more specific and marketing oriented strategies have to be considered as suitable. Assuming that trust in informal contexts is greater than in the interaction with Government, or institutional message, the use of 'trusted brands and popular media such as soap operas'¹⁶ is actually considered and the UK Department for Environment, Food and Natural Affairs (DEFRA) appears as seriously looking toward those opportunities.

A similar hypothesis might raise strictly ethical concerns about the deliberate use of 'not declared' or implicit message. This kind of practices is often adopted in commercial campaigns and, in that context, it is considered as socially deplorable, but what if it is used, by institutions, for environmental awareness? Here we have a general point: have institutions always to act according to an idea of *institutional action* or can they adopt more subtle strategies to achieve a goal that, ultimately, is for the common well-being? This point goes beyond the aim of this chapter but needs to be addressed. Beside the environmental communication being more or less explicit, another point, tied to the aim a policy may have, is that of the perception to elicit in the public.

The way in which environmental issues are communicated is supposed to make the use of media more or less effective; for example, guilt and fear could produce an emotive removal of the subject matter, making the communication not useful.¹⁷ The merely catastrophic attitude often privileged by media on environmental issues – focusing on the most dramatic or ‘pulp’ aspects – might be counter-effective because it plays on a sentiment of fear and describes problems as not solvable, triggering an approach of inaction,¹⁸ sometimes still maintaining the misconceived idea of unmotivated events, without any human responsibility.

The difficult equilibrium point between a too rational and a too emotive way to treat this matter is where three forces are balanced:

- the ability to elicit participation and ethical engagement;
- a not excessive presence of fear, also considered that, anyway, it is just a finished and ephemeral stimulus for change;¹⁹
- offering the needed level of information to make evident the relation between human actions and environmental issues, triggering a possible reaction.

Not casually the text stresses the importance of coherent messages – labelled as *consistency* – because of their greater persuasive force.²⁰ But, looking at reality, environmental issues are presently communicated in many very different ways, some of them in direct contradiction; just think about climate change: is not uncommon to see a programme denouncing the urge for an intervention followed by a more sceptical or minimising one. For the public opinion this is clearly a confusing and counter-intuitive approach.

What can be done to this regard? Should the diffusion of *sceptical* positions in some way be restrained? Definitely a provocative question, having two sides: a scientific one, regarding the responsibility of choosing a position instead of others, according to which we should also ask ourselves if a prudential approach might be acceptable, assuming that a change in behaviour would be anyway positive, even without a tragedy just around the corner. The second one is more focused on media system and concerns the legitimacy of requesting the adoption of an unanimous or at least consistent editorial policy (supposing it is feasible and that a sufficiently influential subject exists).

Even if we assume for a moment the legitimacy of a similar request, it is still not so obvious if media should accept such a limitation. Probably we should consider in a different way the obligation to conform to those standards for privately owned media, relying for their existence on autonomous policies and sources (like advertising). This is obviously relevant if we note that media streams are the place of the striking contrast between appeals for reducing pollution and waste and encouraging consumption.

If we consider it on the basis of our consolidated set of values we should of course conclude that it would be a not legitimate limitation of freedom of speech, thought and trade, and that this hypothesis should be definitely rejected. But, from a different point of view, keeping in our mind the scenario in which the ecological situation and the needed reforms affect so deeply the values system, put State institutions in a contradiction, question the forms of citizenship, and considering possible effects of a not effective action (or even worse of an inaction) it might not be so unimaginable appointing media system a role that is, at the same time, of responsibility and limitation.

It could be even considered unfair if the media system would not be subjected to any constraint while citizens see their freedom questioned in the name of an ecological need and of an ecological responsibility. Obviously, all this looks ambiguous and probably frightening but, in front of State institutions forced to adopt a 'soft' approach to achieve essential goals, should not media – playing such a relevant role in present social system – contribute with their policies and even with the acceptance of a moderation of one's own freedom? This perspective is far from the conception of the liberal State we are used to, but, probably, also the idea of State has to be renewed in the quest for an *Ecological State*.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, it is undoubtedly true that media can play a role in the change even if their capacity of affecting behaviours should not be imagined as a panacea, nor it is a valuable excuse for institutional capitulation or inaction. The idea of institutions intervening on individual freedoms is always scaring and the same happens with any limitation to the freedom of information, and it is difficult to overvalue this aspect, but it would be simply paradoxical and contradictory to call for a solution to ecological issues, largely produced by human behaviours, and keep imagining strategies and policies not affecting social systems and their everyday life, of which media system is part and parcel. Probably, in this step toward ecologically informed reform we discover a last tenacious stronghold of anthropocentrism.

Notes

¹ Even if their conception of the relation between the citizen and State institutions widely differs, especially for what concerns the equilibrium point between individual freedom and social constraints as well as about the very nature of humankind, two authors that may be recalled here as classic examples of the philosophical tradition seeing in social institutions a 'correction' to a practically imperfect 'state of nature' are Thomas Hobbes and John Locke. As illustrative works we may refer, respectively, to: Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan or The Matter*,

Forme and Power of a Common Wealth Ecclesiastical and Civil (London: Dent, 1914); John Locke, *The Second Treatise of Civil Government* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1946); John Locke, *Essays on the Law of Nature* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1954).

² The formulation of the concept of ‘organic solidarity’ was a central concept in the work of Durkheim, mainly clearly expressed in works like Émile Durkheim, *The Division of Labour in Society* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1984). Writes Durkheim: ‘For if society lacks the unity that derives from the fact that the relationships between its parts are exactly regulated, that unity resulting from the harmonious articulation of its various functions assured by effective discipline and if, in addition, society lacks the unity based upon the commitment of men’s wills to a common objective, then it is no more than a pile of sand that the least jolt or the slightest puff will suffice to scatter.’ Kenneth Allan, *Explorations in Classical Sociological Theory: Seeing the Social World* (New York: Pine Forge Press 2005), 136.

³ Callicott offers a richly informed analysis on the relation between religious narratives and the emerging models of relation with ecological systems, also exploring the chance for establishing not a unique environmental ethic but ‘many’ ethics, grounded in to the different narratives. See: J. Baird Callicott, *Earth’s Insights. A Multicultural Survey of Ecological Ethics from the Mediterranean Basin to the Australian Outback* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994). A more specific analysis on the implications of the prevailing Western religious narratives, and especially on the consequences of the idea of the coincidence of humankind with the general finality of the creation, is that of Lynn White Jr., ‘The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis’, *Science* 155 (1967): 1203-1207.

⁴ A synthesis of the definition Talcott Parsons gave of social systems: ‘A social system is defined as any group of people who interact long enough to create a shared set of understandings, norms, or routines to integrate action, and established patterns of dominance and resource allocation.... They must be oriented toward certain goals or objectives, they must create mechanisms for integration and adaptation, and they must create mechanisms for self-reproduction.’ Frances Westley, Steven R. Carpenter, William A. Brock, Crawford S. Holling and Lance H. Gunderson, ‘Why Systems of People and Nature Are Not Just Social and Ecological Systems’, in *Panarchy: Understanding Transformations in Human and Natural Systems*, eds. Lance H. Gunderson and Crawford S. Holling (Washington: Island Press, 2002), 103-120.

⁵ Buttel writes: ‘Ecological modernization theorists are basically of the view that as much as environmental problems in the past have been caused by an industrially driven process of expanded production and consumption, the solution to environmental problems cannot be found in radical movements that seek to restore the lower levels of output and consumption that prevailed years ago or in

centralized command-and-control regulation. Rather, in the ecological modernization perspective, the solution to environmental problems caused by industrialization requires more industrialization – or *super industrialization* – albeit industrial development of a far different sort than that which prevailed during most of the 20th century.’ Frederick H. Buttel, ‘Environmental Sociology and the Explanation of Environmental Reform’, *Organization & Environment* 16 (2003): 322.

⁶ Diamond observes how there is something like a chain of interrelated problems that may impede or make more unlikely that a social system be able to confront an ecological crisis. In detail: the group could not be able to foresee that a problem is going to emerge; they could be not aware of the actual existence of a problem; even if aware they could not try to solve it; they could attempt to solve the problem but without success. Jared Diamond, *Collapse. How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* (London: Penguin Books, 2005), 28-29.

⁷ One of the most recent articulations of the Latouche’s concept of ‘downshifting’ is contained in the book: Serge Latouche, *Vers un Société d’Abondance Frugale. Contresens et Controverses sur la Décroissance* (Paris: Mille et une Nuits, 2012).

⁸ Writes Arne Naess: ‘The vast majority of experts with influence on the policy of Western industrial states avoid argumentation from fundamentals. They prefer to state which are the *preferences of the majority*, or are in harmony with *the stated goals of the government elected democratically* by the populace.’ Alan Drengson and Bill Devall, *Ecology of Wisdom: Writings by Arne Naess* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2008), 175.

⁹ Buttel, *Environmental Sociology*, 321.

¹⁰ While in many studies on green marketing the attention is mainly focused on the rational evaluations and on the relation between beliefs and behaviours, Pooley and O’Connor contend that the emotional dimension has a great relevance both in the behavioural choice as well as an instrument that may be used in the ‘green’ communication. Julie A. Pooley and Moira O’Connor, ‘Environmental Education and Attitudes: Emotions and Beliefs Are What Is Needed’, *Environment and Behaviour* 32 (2002): 711-723.

¹¹ Arne Naess introduces the idea of an ecologically conscious behaviour, based upon an ideal coincidence of inner personal attitude with ‘ethic’ behaviour. In consequence of this coincidence, acting in an ecologically adequate way, even when it implies restriction and self-limitation, becomes not a frustrating or violent act but a benevolent and satisfying one. Drengson and Devall, *Ecology of Wisdom*, 34.

¹² Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, *Climate Change: Engagement and Behaviour* (London: 2010).

¹³ Drengson and Devall, *Ecology of Wisdom*, 1.

¹⁴ Whitmarsh contends that, even among the rational motivations leading to the adoption of ecologically friendly behaviours in consumers, some of those motivations are related to those intended by policy makers or are not related at all with an environmental concern, but just with an economical or practical one (e.g. people save energy to spend less money not to protect environment). Lorraine Whitmarsh, 'Behavioural Responses to Climate Change: Asymmetry of Intentions and Impacts', *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 29 (2009): 13-23.

¹⁵ Irene Lorenzoni and Mike Hulme, 'Believing Is Seeing: People's Views of Future Socio-Economic and Climate Change in England and in Italy', *Public Understanding of Science* 18 (2009): 383-400.

¹⁶ Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, *Climate Change*, 3.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁸ Ellen et al. observe how some not completely rational elements may shape the individual attitude towards a certain action; for example, it has been observed how the perceived effectiveness of a certain behaviour or policy could be a key element in determining the actual chance for an individual to adopt it. Pam Scholder Ellen, Joshua Lyle Wiener and Cathy Cobb-Walgren, 'The Role of Perceived Consumer Effectiveness in Motivating Environmentally Conscious Behaviours', *Journal of Public Policy and Marketing* 10 (1991): 102-117.

¹⁹ Russell points out how fear cannot be chosen as a basic value for long term policies, just because people can't sustain indefinitely the pressure of fear as stimulus for action or avoidance of behaviours. Bertand Russell, *Authority and the Individual* (London: Unwin, 1977).

²⁰ Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, *Climate Change*, 3.

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