An Alternative Ecology?

Gérald HESS

In Émilie Hache's view, protecting the environment implies taking into account economic and social issues. But this political approach demands that we also question more profoundly our idea of nature and the relationship that we have with it.

Reviewed: Émilie Hache (ed.), *Ecologie politique*: *Cosmos, communautés, milieux* [Political Ecology: Cosmos, Communities, Environments], translations into French by Cyril le Roy, Paris, Éditions Amsterdam, 2012, 403 pp., 20 €.

Émilie Hache, who teaches philosophy at the University of Paris-Nanterre, is the author of a book on environmental philosophy published in 2011, called *Ce à quoi nous tenons*: *Propositions pour une écologie pragmatique* [What We Care About: Proposals for a Pragmatic Ecology]. As the title of that book shows, she is interested in an ecology in which the concept of nature is not self-evident, and is not "scientific" in the sense that it becomes a field of research that is exclusively biological: ecology must be political, for environmental problems are not just ecological, they are also social, economic and political. This observation leads her at the outset to distinguish between political ecology and environmental ethics, and to criticize the latter: "environmental ethics leaves aside or treats as secondary several other problems posed by the ecological crisis" (p. 12). The ecological vision of environmental ethics then becomes a partial perspective, founded in most environmentalist thinking on a concept of nature as a wilderness in which humans are absent.

This criticism of environmental ethics deserves attention. I shall come back to it after summarizing a new collection of texts edited by Hache as an extension of her previous work. In this collection of articles and book extracts her aim is to illustrate the idea that ecology should not be reduced to a description of nature separate from humans, but should consist of understanding the two together in their mutual relations.

Environmental protection and the politics of ecology

This book is divided into four chapters, each dealing with a particular theme in political ecology. The first chapter sets out to illustrate the idea that protecting the environment is an activity that cannot really be understood without placing it into a cultural and political context. Basing the preservation of nature on arguments from scientific ecology is a slant that reflects a narrow western perspective. This approach excludes from the start social and political aspects that are at the heart of some environmental practices. Coherent environmentalism requires taking these into account, which, as Hache shows, is what political ecology tries to do. Among the items offered to readers in this first part is an essay consisting of reflections on environmentalism in northern and southern countries, which was the introduction to a book co-edited by the Indian historian Ramachandra Ruha and one of the

precursors of ecological economics, the Spaniard Joan Martinez-Alier. Likewise, an article on whaling, by Atsushi Ishii and Ayako Okubo, deals with a very topical issue. Its Japanese authors show that the defenders of whaling constantly appeal to Japanese ancestral tradition, whereas in fact this is an invention that the government supports in order to make whaling more acceptable by westerners, who, eager to be tolerant, are then able to excuse an attitude that they do not understand. In addition, latent Japanese nationalism, especially with regard to the United States after the Second World War, is probably another reason for not agreeing to an international moratorium on whaling. This first chapter ends with the *Final Declaration of Cochabamba*, a political reaction by Bolivian President Eduardo Morales to the failure of the 2009 Copenhagen Conference on climate change, in which he upholds the rights of Mother Earth.

The texts selected by Hache in the second chapter deal with the politics of ecology. They are structured around the idea of reclaiming or reconquering. But what must be reconquered? No less than democracy: "Developing an alternative version of ecology calls for a political reconquering, for democracy is also damaged, and people are deprived of it because of the growing complexity of social life" (p. 108). In some of the texts presented here the issue is social inequalities connected with ecological politics, inequalities which, as the specialist in environmental justice Giovanna Di Chiro observes, are often neglected by ecological movements. We also find here two fierce critiques of the deep ecology movement in America. This trend in ecology – towards a radical and "deep", as opposed to "superficial" ecology – was launched by the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess, but it took off in a big way in the United States, in writers such as the sociologist Bill Devall, the philosopher George Sessions, the poet Gary Snyder and the ecologist Paul Shepard. It is criticized for paying too much attention to debateable metaphysical considerations about nature conceived of as wilderness, a notion that is at odds with the real issues of ecology, such as consumerism, militarism, capitalism, and social domination (see the articles by Ramachandra Ruha and Murray Bookchin).

Human-non-human cohabitation and the habitat

The third part of the book focuses on political ecology's attempts to get beyond the traditional division between nature and humans. In other (Hache's) words, it is about "taking non-humans seriously, taking them into account as beings who have a history or rather with whom we share a history, with whom we cohabit and co-evolve, whether they be domestic pets, farm animals, or any of the living species on whom we depend in order to live" (p. 183). In this vein, we find texts on laboratory animals such as mice, modified to be used in the fight against cancer (Donna Haraway); livestock like sheep, about whom one can wonder whether they are really as dumb as we think (Vinciane Despret); and, more globally, on that quite astonishing "organism", the planet Earth, helping us put into perspective the importance of the human species (Lynn Margulis). In all of these discussions, the point is to approach these various issues by throwing light on the ways of cohabiting with the non-humans, ways that up to now we have paid little or no attention to. This task is all the more relevant because it requires, as Hache says, "new narratives" and a "new epistemololgy" (p. 18).

The last chapter looks at the issue of the habitat. For nature is not virginal, it is inhabited; as the geographer Augustin Berque says, nature is an ecumen. One of the four texts in this chapter is by the American geographer William Denevan, on natural conditions at the time of Christopher Columbus' discovery of the New World. He discusses the history of nature (forests, soils, vegetation, etc.) and of human habitats on the American continent

beginning with the European discovery of that continent in 1492. His surprising conclusion is that, contrary to popular belief, nature at this period was more anthropized than it would be 150 years later – again showing how mythical the idea of nature as a wilderness is. Another text in this chapter, by the historian William Cronon, provides an "eco-biography" of Chicago, showing how this city was established with some profound transformations in the immediate environment, and how in turn these transformations have shaped the city. The two other studies in this chapter are by an American ethnologist and sociologist, Mike Davis, in an extract from *Le Pire des mondes possibles*, a French version of his book *Planet of Slums* (2006), an ecological account of the world's great shantytowns; and by a geographer, Jennifer Wolch, dealing with inter-species relations in the case of the human and coyote inhabitants of Los Angeles, and raising questions about the rampant urbanization that the coyotes appear to be victims of.

Political ecology and environmental ethics

All of the texts that Hache assembles for us are taken to illustrate an "alternative" ecology that studies and tries to understand humans within their environment, starting with the principle that ecology is not – or not only – about ecological processes studied by scientific ecology regardless of social, political and economic relationships among humans as part of their relationship with nature. In this sense, nature is always simultaneously a matter of culture, of science, and of politics, as suggested by the sociologist of science Bruno Latour's influential book *Politiques de la nature* (translated into English as *Politics of Nature*). Thus it is not accidental that Émilie Hache's collection begins with an essay by Latour on Ulrich Beck. Latour here takes up Isabelle Stengers' idea of "cosmopolitics", according to which the world is inhabited by various beings whose coexistence may not always be possible. In line with this, in introducing her collection Hache emphasizes that "ecology does not deal with nature, but it is interested in the cosmopolitics which the crisis of this concept [nature] has (finally) made room for" (p. 24).

Hache's book is clearly part of this movement that tries to get beyond the reductive scientific approach to environmental problems and issues (the approach of scientific ecology) in order to see them in a social and political perspective. Her choice of texts gives us a varied overview of this orientation. I believe this helps us to understand the contribution of political ecology to debates about the environment. Nevertheless, seeing in the ecological crisis also a crisis of the concept of nature seems inaccurate. It is true that with the emergence of scientific ecology at the end of the nineteenth century and its rise in the twentieth century, nature was often perceived through an ecological prism. And it is also true that one (but only one) part of environmental ethics has based its claims on an ecological view of nature (I have in mind such philosophers as Homes Rolston III and J. Baird Callicott).

But a brief overview at the concept of nature in the western tradition going back to Aristotle shows that this ecological view of nature has always coexisted with other views: nature as a place of the existence of humans, and nature serving human needs and interests.[1] So wilderness is not the only representation of nature put forth by environmental ethics. And although some important and influential environmental ethicists claim on the basis of ecology that nature has an intrinsic value[2], that is precisely in order to counter the very real strength of the representation of nature simply as a means serving human ends. So debates in

[1] See Gérald Hess, *Ethiques de la nature*, Paris, PUF, 2013, ch. 1.

[2] Note that nature having an intrinsic value does not necessarily imply that the nature to be protected must be a wilderness.

environmental ethics always involve several different understandings of nature, which sometimes coexist and sometimes clash.

That is why I have trouble accepting Hache's sharp separation – not to say opposition – of environmental ethics and political ecology. Admittedly, discussions in environmental ethics are abstract, but that does not invalidate their relevance and interest, for ultimately all concrete environmental actions and decisions have ontological (or metaphysical) and axiological presuppositions, even if these are implicit or even unconscious. It would be unfortunate not to attempt to elucidate such presuppositions, first for the sake of coherence, but also because all decisions and actions fall into some theoretical context, and are thereby seen in perspective relative to other possible contexts. This makes for an increase in the meaning and comprehension of an action's reasons and grounds. This observation applies to Hache's claims about political ecology themselves.

In her criticism of environmental ethics, Hache says that we should stop asking "who is allowed to come into the moral sphere, and under what conditions?" Instead, we must ask: "who has been forgotten or excluded by treating the concept of nature as the subject of ecology?" and, "conversely, how can cohabitation by heterogeneous beings be made possible?" But after all, isn't preferring this question of exclusion (raised by political ecology) to the issue of inclusion (formulated by environmental ethics) equivalent to prejudging the answer to the inclusion question? Starting out by not excluding anyone from the nature to be under consideration is equivalent to responding very clearly to the question of environmental ethics, but without ever having posed this question. In effect, we are being told to ignore a moral stance that itself deserves to be debated. By formulating the question of political ecology in this way, Hache is airily adopting a moral stance that it is precisely the task of environmental ethics to identify and to discuss: this stance is a particular form of ecocentrism, classifying together in a shared world human beings and non-human things (animals, forests, etc.).

This work of explaining and clarifying undertaken by environmental ethics helps us put into perspective the theoretical contribution of the political kind of ecology that Hache advocates. That contribution can then be subjected to comparisons with other theoretical contexts brought to bear on environmental issues – for example, those of sustainable development, ecological transition, and "green" economics. All of these alternatives promote certain values over others. So this exercise would not be superfluous. It would help us to identify the specific features of political ecology, its potential connections with and differences from other orientations, and so on. So it would contribute to the interdisciplinary dialogue that Hache seeks.

In addition, this effort to explain aids political ecology directly, as a field of research. Political ecology clearly throws a lot of light on institutional, political, social, and economic issues involved with environmental problems; however – as we have just seen regarding Hache's critique of environmental ethics – it naturally does this on behalf of the values that it upholds. To me it seems vital that researchers in political ecology be or become conscious of these values, and debate them. Of course, if they do that, they are willy-nilly moving into the discourse of environmental ethics – which thus serves even those who try to escape it.

Hence, while environmental ethics is more abstract (because more profound), from the practical point of view it clearly needs political ecology, to see concretely the social, political and economic aspects of the environment. However, it is fallacious to claim (as Hache does)

that environmental ethics separates the different dimensions (ethical, social, political, etc.) of ecological problems (see p. 16). It is not a question of separation, but of focus. Environmental ethics pays attention to the ontological and moral assumptions in the human relationship with nature. That is just what political ecology does not do. And this is why, inversely and this time on the level of epistemology, political ecology needs environmental ethics. In fact, while ecology is indeed political, the institutional and social factors do not work independently from an ontological (or metaphysical) and moral view of the world, which it is the task of environmental ethics to elucidate and to question. All social and political changes and evolutions involve changes and evolutions in shared values, i.e. in morality. To understand such an evolution, and to promote or to criticize it, it is the job of ethical reflection to understand the corresponding morality, to question its foundations and legitimacy. Why should it be any different when it comes to the relationship between human beings and nature?

Émilie Hache's introduction to her collection suggests that environmental ethics should give way to studies in political ecology. I do not think it is necessary to choose sides here. The environment is sufficiently complex as a field of study to suggest that political ecology and environmental ethics should keep in touch with each other.

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