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► **To cite this version:**

Corine Pelluchon. Ecology as new Enlightenment. Global Solutions Journal, 2021, Global Solutions Journal. The World policy Forum, 7, p. 218-223. hal-03240808

**HAL Id: hal-03240808**

**<https://hal.science/hal-03240808>**

Submitted on 28 May 2021

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# Ecology as new Enlightenment

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Keywords:

consideration, corporeality, domination, ecology, enlightenment

## THE REVERSAL OF REASON INTO IRRATIONALITY AND THE SCHEME OF DOMINATION

The COVID-19 pandemic and the threat of collapse due to climate change and the erosion of biodiversity point to the aberrations of a development model that is based on the unlimited exploitation of natural resources and other living beings. More than ever, it appears necessary to reorient the economy in order to put it at the service of people and the preservation of the common world.

To understand why ecological transition is a chance for re-initiating a civilizational process, we must explain the reversal of progress into regression, of rationalism into irrationality. A double amputation of reason explains its degradation. First, during late modernity, that is, after the eighteenth century, rationalism became instrumental and gave rise to the era of quantification. Whereas reason in Kant or Rousseau was viewed as the most appropriate way to develop a common project, it gradually became an instrument at the service of individual desires. By being cut off from truth, reason was reduced to calculation. It lost its moral dimension as well as its capacity to distinguish the just and the unjust and could support the most barbaric and disproportionate enterprises. The second amputation of reason is more ancient, since it is a consequence of the

radical separation between civilization and nature that is specific to the Western world. It underpins the will to master inherited from the Enlightenment, and we realize today that it could lead to the ruin of our civilization.

**»To understand why ecological transition is a chance for re-initiating a civilizational process, we must explain the reversal of progress into regression, of rationalism into irrationality.«**

The global crisis with which we are confronted is a crisis of reason. The latter is trapped in the net of domination, which is exercised over others and nature, but is also rooted in the rejection of our vulnerability and in the repression of our carnal condition. This largely explains our obsession for control and our contempt for other living beings.

This process of self-destruction of reason and civilization is not a fatality. How-

ever, to interrupt it, we need to identify its mechanisms and characterize what we call the Scheme of Domination. A scheme is the organizing principle of a society. It is made up of all the conscious and unconscious representations that guide our economic, social and political choices and also determines our values and desires as well as our behavior. (Pelluchon, 2021: 98-100). The Scheme of Domination transforms everything (agriculture, husbandry, politics) into war. It elicits an attitude of predation towards nature and other living creatures and turns techniques into ends that are disconnected from any civilizational purposes. When we are aware of the Scheme of Domination, we understand the connections between apparently distinct phenomena, such as totalitarianism and capitalism, the destruction of nature and the exploitation of other human beings, animal abuse and our inability to coexist with people who are different from us. This awareness prevents us from limiting ourselves to the mere denunciation of a single economic or political system and helps us to decolonize our imaginary.

It therefore becomes clear that positioning ecology at the centre of public policies not only implies combatting global warming and the erosion of biodiversity. The required changes in our modes of production and lifestyles depend on a radical questioning of our representations and our relationship with other living beings. So, what makes ecology an emancipation project and the translation, in terms of public policy, of a new Enlightenment? What enables the latter to lay the foundations of a common project which, while being radically ecological and avoiding the pitfalls of

the hegemonic universalism of the past, also strengthens the fundamental principles of the Enlightenment, namely autonomy, democracy and the idea that there is one humanity and one planet?

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#### **ECO-PHENOMENOLOGY AS THE FOUNDATION FOR A NEW SOCIAL CONTRACT**

Ecology cannot be reduced to its environmental dimension, which is mostly associated with the fight against global warming. It entails a social dimension linked to the organization of work and the fair allocation of resources and has a subjective meaning (Guattari, 2000). More precisely, ecology is the wisdom or the rationality of our habitation of the Earth and our cohabitation with others, human and non-human. Thus, it is part of our existence.

An inquiry into human existence that takes our carnal and earthly condition seriously highlights our dependence on nature and other human and non-human beings. As a consequence, ecology is a major component of ethics and politics. We can no longer ground the political association upon an atomistic and abstract subject, considered only in light of freedom conceived as the ability to make choices and to change them. The phenomenological description of eating, dwelling, living in a place and being co-residents with other humans and animals, leads to an eco-phenomenology which shows that the subject is always relational and dependent on natural and cultural things that nourish his or her life, giving it meaning and flavor. This philosophy of corporeality provides the foundation for a new political theory. The goals of the state are not only security between people and the reduction of unfair inequalities. The protection of the finite biosphere, the alleviation of animal suffering, the concern for future generations and the consideration of all the dimensions that enable us to flourish frame a new social contract (Pelluchon, 2019 :254-262).

Ethics defines my ability to make room for others, be they human or non-human, present and future. Additionally, justice supposes that my right to use whatever is good for my own preservation is not only limited by my fellow citizens. The impact of our lifestyles and activities on future generations and other cultures, the respect of the ethological norms and the subjectivity of animals and the attention to the irreversible nature of certain technologies are to be taken into account by laws and public policies. Thus, the declaration of human rights which is based upon the in-

dividual moral agent is no longer sufficient to guarantee equity, justice and peace in the present ecological, technological and demographical context. Moreover, globalization and our ecological footprint have changed the structure of our responsibility because we may unintentionally inflict damage on unborn beings and on people we never encounter. This is why the Universal Declaration of Humankind Rights proposed at the Paris Climate Summit in 2015 complements the former philosophy of human rights by proclaiming the right of humanity and of all living species to exist and live in a healthy environment and describes our duties to preserve the common goods. (<http://droitshumanite.fr/>)

These criteria of justice can provide guidance both at the individual and collective level. They are not values, but structures of existence that proceed from the phenomenological description of the human being considered in his geographical, social and technological environment and in his interactions with other forms of life. Phenomenology then offers an alternative to relativism, but also to the abstract and hegemonic universalism of the past Enlightenment, which has been accused by postmodernism of hiding behind so-called general principles to impose a model of civilization. Thinking about our carnal and earthly condition restores the ideal unity of humanity while recognizing the diversity of cultures. Everyone can admit the validity of these principles, which stress the centrality of ecology. However, even if they are universalizable, their application must be contextualized and put to a debate. Public policies cannot be the product of arrogant reasoning that seeks to impose fixed conceptions of good and evil, just and unjust,

in a vertical and homogeneous manner. The universalism constructed here is in context and lateral: It is not the result of an overarching reason, but is nourished by multiple perspectives on the world. (Pelluchon, 2021: 72 ; Merleau-Ponty, 1964).

However, acknowledging that the duties of the state entail an extension of the common good to other generations, other cultures and other species is still insufficient. We are only halfway there. In fact, everyone knows what is wrong, and numerous reports and discourses explain how to concretely execute the ecological transition. Yet, few people are changing their lifestyles and most governments still opt for an extractivist and productivist model or support intensive livestock farming. In addition, the ecological transition appears as a burden from which everyone tries to escape. The current challenge is therefore to bridge the gap between theory and practice, awareness and action, and to make the ecological transition a stimulating project. Does the current pandemic, by highlighting the counterproductive nature of our development model in environmental, health, economic and social terms, provide an opportunity for a profound reshaping of our representations and a change of scheme that could lead to an ecological realignment?

### **THE EMANCIPATORY STRENGTH OF ECOLOGY AND THE SCHEME OF CONSIDERATION**

In order to respect planetary limits and other living beings, we must overcome the separation between nature and civilization and the narrow anthropocentrism in which we have been brought up. Today, ecology is at the centre of the reflexive attitude that

defines Enlightenment, which is the ability to relate critically to the present in order to define its challenges and to meet them. We need to know what has to be preserved and what has to be abandoned. In other words, we must initiate a civilizational epoché<sup>1</sup>. Admitting the aberrations of our model of development, which testifies to the irrationality of our dwelling on Earth, obliges us to examine our practices in agriculture, trade, urbanism, and health care, one by one. It also implies freeing ourselves from the prejudices and ways of beings that support our predatory attitude towards nature and encourage our addiction to consumption. By combatting the ideas and attitudes responsible for the radical separation between nature and culture and for the denial of the community of vulnerability that unites us with others, human and non-human, we can gradually dismantle the Scheme of Domination and make room for other forms of life and culture.

Ecology is an emancipatory force, because it is impossible to respect nature and other living beings while continuing to conceive oneself as an empire within an empire. Ecology that involves the respect of planetary boundaries in our ways of producing and consuming presupposes the acceptance of our own limits. The latter are primarily related to our carnal and earthly condition, our vulnerability and finitude, but they also refer to our fallibility and to the fact that our knowledge is always limited. Ecology therefore implies humility, without which we cannot cooperate with others or institute the common good. To operate the ecological transition, we ought to carefully formulate what risks not to run and have a cautious response to the unexpected events emerging from

the interactions of humans with their environment and technologies. Ecology is the political translation of the Scheme of Consideration, for which individual creativity and the preservation of the common world are the two main criteria of justice. (Pelluchon, 2021:141-148). These criteria impose to invest in specific areas of research and to refuse technologies and products that can degrade the conditions of life of other beings or cause our own extinction.

Consideration means recognizing the own value of things and beings, in order to make good use of them or to treat them with respect. It is based on an experience of something that is incommensurable: the common world (Pelluchon, 2019 :106-115) The latter welcomes me at my birth and will survive my individual death. It is made up of generations and encompasses the living and the cultural and technological heritage. The awareness of belonging to a world which is older and larger than ourselves gives depth to our existence and makes us feel the bond that unites us with other living beings. It transforms our desires to the point that we have pleasure in consuming less – and in a different way. The desire to transmit a habitable world becomes a concrete motivation of our actions. Living means “living from” natural and cultural things, “living with” others, be they human and non-human, and “living for”, that is, having the common world as the horizon of one’s thoughts and actions. To eat, work, produce, or create a company, having in mind the preservation of the common world and respecting the dignity and creativity of people contributes to a development model based on the Scheme of Consideration.

This scheme corresponds to an enlargement of the self at several levels, ranging from civic-mindedness to a commitment to the protection of other living beings. It actually answers the aspirations of many individuals who are convinced that the current development model is outdated and would like to find meaning and conviviality in all aspects of their lives. The growing interest manifested by numerous people for the environment and the fate of animals are the harbingers of the age of the living. Gradually substituting the Scheme of Domination

for the Scheme of Consideration to guide our social, economic and political choices would enable us to build a common project that responds to these aspirations instead of disappointing them and nurturing resentment and racism, hatred of reason and rejection of democracy. Therefore, ecology is at the centre of the new Enlightenment, which goes hand in hand with a form of humanism that is based on the recognition of our carnal and earthly condition upon which our responsibility towards others, human and non-human, is grounded.

<sup>1</sup> E. Husserl defines epoché as the first operation of phenomenology understood as a way to accomplish the Enlightenment, whose spiritual figure is Socrates. Epoché means that we put into brackets the “natural attitude”, which is characterized by a certain dogmatism, leading people to believe that their representations are reality and to naively adhere to them.

<http://droitshumanite.fr/>

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