

Breaking away from Liberal Democracy: Ecological Governance and Democratic Politics

Li Meng (Corresponding author)

School of International Relations, Beijing Foreign Studies University

Room 1126, International Building, No.19 North Xisanhuan Road, Beijing, P.R. China 100089

Tel: 86-10-88817822 E-mail: limeng8503@163.com

Abstract

Most of the scholars take the Ecological problems as technical or social issues. Ultimately, effective ecological governance requires the support from democratic institutions. The mainstream liberal democratic system seems unable to prompted ecological balance, which propose inequality, completion and confrontation. New democratic ideals need to be adopted to support ecological governance. At the global level, it needs the concrete and authoritative democratic mechanism with great legitimacy and executive capacity; at the regional level, the democratic mechanism which could tolerate and coordinate the conflict between different interests should be adopted; in the process of government departments' ecological management, the democratic mechanism with clear rights and responsibilities division between sectors could play a good role; in the process of plural actors' participation in the ecological governance, the democratic mechanism that can arouse the common public conscious, and gradually form the public reason might a better choice. All the mechanisms above have essential conflicts with the liberal democratic system. Therefore, in the process of ecological governance, we should explore the democratic mechanisms which can remedy the defects of liberal democratic system. The theories and practices of deliberative and participatory democracy can provide many inspirations.

Key words: Ecological Governance; Liberalism; Deliberative Democracy; Participatory Democracy

1 Introduction

The construction of ecological civilization is the common theme for the humanity today. Scholars from different countries and research fields have explored the conceptions, contents, principles, goals and paths of ecological civilization from different perspectives. ^[1-2] According to the overview of the recent literature, ^[3] it can be found that current researches on this topic include the harmonious and symbiotic relationship between man, nature and society, which have gone beyond the narrow relations between man and nature. About how to constructing ecological civilization, scholars gradually surpass the narrow-minded environmental, and pay more attention to introspect the production mode of liberal capitalism ^[4], the mode of economic growth based on the core of GDP ^[5], the social structure characterized by inequalities ^[6-8], the political structure with the core of competitive democracy, and the antagonistic ideology between different groups and nations. More and more scholars try to use the interpersonal relationship coordination to resolve the contradiction between human and nature effectively and sustainably. To this end, scholars have proposed a variety of coordinated proposals, such as changing social mode of production, promoting the ecological productivity, advocating green consumption, and inventing ecological civilization indicators, which can promote the revolution of values with the core of ecological civilization and build a new eco-system of governance.

The ecological governance focuses on the most urgent issue of environmental protection and prevention, so it is able to set up the coordinating bridge between human and nature, and provide an important platform guiding the mutual communication and cooperation between government,

enterprise, person and NGOs.^[9] In addition, the ecological governance also creates the practical space for the new patterns of production and consumption, new indicators system and ecological values, and the operational mode for the ultimate realization of the harmonious coexistence between human and nature, human and human. It can be concluded that, the ecological governance is one of the core issues in the process of ecological civilization construction. Because there are so many subjects involving in the process of ecological governance, so it would inevitably lead to conflict and coordination between the old and new values, systems, mode of production and consumption. Thus, many scholars argue that the success of ecological governance is bound to democracy.^[10-11] The “democracy” doesn’t mean to the liberal democracy which emphasize competition and confrontation, because the liberal democracy is much kind of the accessory of capitalist logic of production and consumption. It could not relieve the conflict between human and nature, and human and human. Oppositely, it is an accomplice leading to the ecological deterioration. For example, according to the experience of western countries, the “Greens”, who advocate the ecological protection, are hard to enter the mainstream of the political power system, because of elite controlling, demarcation of constituencies, voting mode and other factors. And “green issues” are also squeezed out of the mainstream agendas by the interest groups and difficult to be discussed deeply by the whole society.

Therefore, many scholars began to seek the new ways to rebuild the eco-democratic politics. For example, some scholars believe that there are intimate relations between the deliberative democracy and the eco-democratic political inspiration and content, because deliberative democracy is prone to put the common interests on the core position, such as the maintenance of ecological diversity or the quality of natural resources. At least, deliberative democracy has much more such content than that in liberal democracy.^[12] In addition, many scholars advocate that plural subjects should participate in the process of ecological governance; other believe that eco-society should be founded on the basis that its citizens could create the caring and sustainable communities through active participation and autonomy. The process of citizens involved in the autonomy is called direct or participatory democracy, and it is also known as the grass-roots democracy due to majority of the people involved in their daily lives.^[13] In short, good ecological governance needs the support of the democratic system, so it needs to explore the link between the ecological governance and democracy based on the rethink of liberal democratic politics.

In essence, “the ecological governance is the management process of maintaining good ecological status which is harmony with human survival and development”.^[14] And its core content is that the multiple subjects, including the government, enterprise, person and social intermediary organizations, will regard the public interests and ecological civilization construction as the central task. Then it can make the legitimate decisions according to the interests of the majority through joint participation of the dialogue, and also form the consensus on public interest and ecological civilization. From the extension, ecological governance doesn’t only include the environmental protection, but also includes a wide range of topics in the exploration of harmonious coexistence between man and nature: at the global level, air pollution, global warming, species extinction, land degradation, deforestation, nuclear radiation, nuclear pollution and other ecological problems are all beyond national boundaries and require global level ecological governance and democratic coordination mechanisms; at the domestic level, watershed management, desertification control, returning farmland to forest (grass) and other ecological governance behaviors also surpass the boundaries of local governments, so it needs the democracy and coordination mechanisms between governments; at the departmental level, an ecological governance plan cannot be completed by individual departments, instead it requires the participation and coordination between the different sectors, such as the department of land, resources, the agriculture, water, the industry, finance and foreign affairs; from the point of subject, more and more cases manifests that the effective ecological governance need the democratic cooperation and communication mechanism between plural subjects. It cannot achieve the effective ecological governance relying on market mechanisms, government intervention, or citizens’ spontaneous participation respectively.

2 Global Ecological Governance and “Authoritative” Democracy

The borderless ecological problems require the borderless ecological management. Only the unity and cooperation of the sovereign nations can we overcome the threat posed by ecological problems to human being’s survival and development on the whole. Many governmental officials and experts have realized this, but the outcomes from the practices are not satisfying. Take the Global Warming as an example, the UN held a global environment conference in Stockholm and established the UNEP in 1972 to solve this threat; in 1992, the Agenda 21 was formed at the UNCED; in the same year, the UNCED, also known as the Earth Summit, was held in Rio de Janeiro and the UNFCCC was established which did not include the international emissions targets and ultimate deadline. The Kyoto Protocol, an international treaty, formed in the third contracting party conference of FCCC, set the standard of the amount of carbon dioxide emissions for countries.¹ The United states had signed the Kyoto Protocol in 1998, however, the Bush Administration rejected to ratify the Kyoto Protocol by the excuse that the reduction of the emission of greenhouse gases will affect the development of American economy and the developing countries should also undertake the obligation of reducing and limiting the emission of greenhouse gases. Following the US, Canada claimed to retreat from the Kyoto Protocol in 2011. Because the deadline of the first commitment period of Kyoto Protocol is coming, how the developed countries to reduce the emission of greenhouse gases further in the second commitment period, also known as the post Kyoto problem, became the main topic in United Nations Climate Change Conference held in Copenhagen, Denmark in 12, 2009. However, only a Copenhagen Accord without any legally binding affect was reached in the conference. Although The World Climate Conference held in end of 2011 in Durban, South Africa, kept the second commitment period of the Kyoto Protocol exist in form, but its legal validity ,emission reduction standard and time duration were not set yet.

On the whole, most of the ecological management actions are faced with kinds of obstacles, such as lack of organizations, funds and human resource. Obstacles also come from the interruption of interest groups. However, the most important reason lies in the noncooperation of the sovereign states.² The concept of sovereign state contains the notion that the central government has the paramount jurisdiction to all things within the territory, and the power cannot be interfered by other countries. As a result, there's a good reason for each country to choose to whether cooperative in global ecological management on the basis of their own interest, especially western capitalist countries dominated by free competitive democracy. Politicians in these countries only concern about the current political and economic interests and the appeals from powerful interest groups. While it comes to ecological management related to long-term global benefit, they show less interest. The case that George Bush refused to sign the Convention on biological diversity on Earth Summit in the year 1992 throws light on this problem. He said "I am President of the America rather than president of the whole world, and all things I should do is to protect American economy." In that year, George Bush faced the challenge of presidential election. Also, solutions of issues, such as allocation of responsibility between rich and poor countries, historic responsibility of the developed capitalist countries for ecological damage or Greenhouse gas emission standards (gross or per capita), still cannot break the deadlocks within the framework of sovereign states. The formation of such deadlocks, after all, is due to a lack of an authoritative supranational institution which is able to sponsor, formulate, adopt, carry out and supervise the relevant ecological management decision. Therefore, many scholars advocate a global democratic government which is above the national government level and is only responsible for global affairs which cannot be handled by national governments. Representatives will be elected by

¹ The protocol requires the leading industrial countries to reduce the carbon dioxide emission by 5.2% on average from 2008 to 2012 compared to 1990, the EU, as a whole, to reduce 8% emission of greenhouse gases, Japanese and Canada to reduce 6% emission of greenhouse gases and America to reduce 7% emission of greenhouse gases.

² “Sovereignty” is defined by *Blackwell Political Science Encyclopedia* as “the power or authority forming the nature of the supreme arbiters, who has the highest authority, to some degree, have the decisions made and distributes settled. The authority means the independence from the outside powers and the power or domination over the inside groups.”

people around the world who can pass the law that intends to slow down and finally reverse global warming and other ecological crisis.^[15] Of course, such an idea of global democratic government may be just a dream. But, at least, it points out a new democratic coordination mechanism for ecological management activities at the global level. This kind of mechanism not only needs to overcome the influence by capital in democratic decision-making procedures, but also can create a communication platform which can respect for different national and ethnic interests and perspectives and promote awareness of common interests of mankind. More importantly, because there are no organization as sovereign government in global ecological governance, so this sort of democracy mechanism should be able to create clear and legitimate authority that offers institutionalized guarantee to the establishments of relevant decisions and laws, or any decision will become a hope in vain. In one word, at the global ecological management level, as it were, the priority is to seek an authoritative form of democracy.

3 Regional Ecological Governance and “Tolerant” Democracy

The central government of every sovereign state has its nominal supreme power domestically; however, neither the unitary states nor the federal states can undertake all the responsibility of eco-environment governance by relying on the central government completely. Therefore, the local governments of each country usually hold more functions in the practice of the eco-environment governance, including resources exploration and distribution, pollution treatment and prevention, laws legislation and enforcement, and publicity and education about environment protection. Nevertheless, the disadvantages are obvious when the local governments hold the most responsibilities in eco-environment governance. Firstly, the areas under the local governments’ jurisdiction are different from those eco-regions. Rivers, mountains, lakes and other man-made standards, for the convenience of governing, are regarded as the borders among the local governments. These standards always divide the whole eco-region into several ones under different administration’ jurisdiction, which would result that the local governments, standing for its own benefits, behave chillily and wouldn’t like to cooperate with the others in the games concerning about ecological interests. The “prisoner's dilemma” and “free ride” are the common phenomena in eco-environment governance. Secondly, in the circumstances of market economy, the local governments tend to be the “brokers”, to some degree, who would chase after the local interest maximization in market trades. The local governments, under the pressure of economy growth and political performance, would always carry out some shortsighted policies in the settlement of problems concerning about profitable eco-environmental resources, such as benefiting themselves at others’ expense, sacrificing the long-term and comprehensive interests for short-term and regional interests, which triggers not only the overexploitation for the eco-environmental resources by the local governments, but also the vicious competition for resources exploitation between neighbor governments, and the finally the eco-environment would be devastatingly damaged.

To the above problems, there are commonly two solutions: First is to establish the regional government. In the light of common issues or cross-region issues, countries all over the world usually tend to breakthrough and adjust the historical formed boundary of local government, and set up the inter-district coordination agency by the central government. For example, France add the regional government above city and town level, and United States set up the TVA to governance the Tennessee River; Second is to establish a cooperation and negotiation organization between regional governments. There are many types of such organizations, such as regional committee and urban league.^[16] However, voluntary cooperation is their shared characteristics. Seen from the practice effect of the above two ways, by establishing regional government, we can take advantage of the central authority and set up formal coordinative organization and systematic rules in a short time; meanwhile, we can mobilize and coordinate the related resources so as to ensure the implementation of ecological managing actions. The weakness of this way lies in the fact that it may lead to the increases of administrative levels and the rise of administration costs. And also, the games between local government and regional government cannot be restricted. Because the establishment of the regional cooperative organizations between governments is built on the basis of voluntary rules, the costs of

games between local governments can be effectively reduced. However,^[17] its weakness is that the cooperative organizations established based on "self-interest" rule by local government have no strong stability and effectiveness, thus may make the ecological managing a form.

In the long run, decentralization, reducing government levels and cutting down the number of government organizations are the trends of government reform. Establishing many formal bureaucracies is not a good choice apparently. Therefore, designing new forms of inter-government cooperation or coordination mechanisms will be an effective choice. In general, the mechanisms should have the following contents. Firstly, the partnership between central government and local government should be established. Though the participative interaction between central and local government, we can complement each other's advantage, reduce the information asymmetry, cut down the transaction cost, etc. Secondly, the coordinating and consultative organizations and mechanisms should be found up in the form of law. Also, the members engaged in the cooperation system should transfer some rights on the issues of ecological governance. Thirdly, also most important, the cooperation between local governments should abandon the self-interest principle and behavioral pattern. In other word, the local governments should change the notions about interest and tolerate different interests in the cooperation activities. A reasonable altruism is the best method to overcome the prisoners' dilemma. Without this, any mechanisms of consultation and coordination would not work effectively. So, we can say that whether the cooperation between local governments can success depend on the democratic mechanisms which not only can tolerate the interest conflicts, but also can resolve the interest conflicts.

4 Inter-departmental Ecological Governance and "Responsible" Democracy

Ecological governance includes the establishment of ecological development plan and laws, the carrying out regulations of ecology protection, the transformation of economic growth pattern, the adjustment of industrial structure, the establishment of ecological compensation mechanism, the improvement of environmental protection education and publicity, and so on. Its contents include the development and protection of water, land, minerals, energy, forest, grasslands and atmosphere, etc. Thus a single government department cannot handle the ecological governance by itself. Every country has its specialized environmental protection department that takes charge of the establishment of the basic rules of environment protection, the environmental monitoring and information distribution, the instruction and coordination of the propaganda, the education of environment protection, the proposal of the direction and scale of fixed investment in environment protection field, and the arrangement of state financial capitals, etc. However, most of its functions are limited in monitoring and advising, and the specific implemental jobs are charged by other government departments. Furthermore, the function of supervision of environmental protection department is also handicapped by other departments. Moreover, the powers of environmental protection department actually are limited in "protection" a passively, which means this department cannot handle the ecological "governance" actively. In practice, there are two ways to change this situation. One is to integrate and adjust the functions of central government's departments, and build a comprehensive ecological management department which works as a giant department. For instance, in 2002, Britain government built an environment, food, rural affairs, trade and industry department which include 10 consultative committees,^[18] and 21 executive bodies, covering the functions from the establishment to the execution of ecological governance policies. Objectively, the reformation of giant department contributes to the resolution of organizational overlapping, duty conflicting and departments acting on its own. Therefore, it should be the basic form of ecological governance for the central government in the future. However, this reformation involves so many areas accompanied with many problems, so the giant department actions in the ecological governance fields turns out to be a long-term work which cannot gain actual effect in a short time. The other way is to build inter-governmental coordinating mechanisms. This way could be divided into two specific patterns:^[19] "vertical type" of coordination of inter department, which means the upper organization builds an ordination organization which is stuffed by people from different department while in the same level; "horizontal

type” of coordination of inter department, which refers to establish a horizontal coordinating organization according to their common problems and tasks. In practice, “vertical type” of coordination actually is a vicious circle of department shuffling and superior centralization of power. Thus it goes against solving the problem systematically. “Horizontal type” of coordination embodies the principles of equal, negotiation, democracy, and mutually benefited. It helps the different departments seek common points, reserve difference, learn from each other, interact with each other, lower the cost, improve the effectiveness, and finally achieve the harmonious relations and the maximum of overall benefits under the instruction of overall purpose of ecological governance. Thus, “horizontal type” of coordination is the reasonable and effective pattern in the process of government’s ecological management. But attentions should also be paid to risks inhered in “horizontal type” of coordination: the duties of the related department are blurry. So this mechanism is easily be used by specific departments to avoid or transfer responsibilities and risk.^[20] Therefore, in the process of building the democratically coordinating mechanism of ecological governance, the most necessary work is to establishing relevant regulations and laws to explicitly define the democratic rights and functions’ scale, so as to prevent cooperation dysfunction caused by blurry responsibility.

5 Plural Subjects’ Ecological Governance and “Rational” Democracy

The diversity, complexity, integrity and the most extensive benefit-correlation of ecological problems endow the activities of ecological governance with innate multi-centricity and multi-subjectivity. Thus, any single body is hardly to hold the tough task of eco-governance. Therefore, what the current academic field discusses most is not the government’s functions on ecological governance, but the participation of citizens, social organizations, communities and companies in eco-governance activities. Many scholars emphasize that “the basis that eco-society based on is the citizens’ abilities of autonomy to build a caring, sustainable community”.^[21] They argue that government should abandon the traditional idea of “government-centered”, and have faith in the abilities to participate in eco-governance of citizens, social organizations and private sector. And also, government should admit, protect and promote the formation of the autonomic eco-society, trying hard to construct the network of relationship and partnership between multiple subjects. At the same time, many scholars have deeply analysis on the possible deficiencies of the eco-governance by plural bodies, for example, “(government) haven’t do enough supervision and take the excessive reaction after problem exposed--trying to do micro management to the partnership; haven’t adjusted the goals between network partners; have built the partnership network containing rivals without analyzing the compatibility between competition partners”.^[22] In other words, multiple subjects’ managing may lead to unclearness of responsibility, unsoundness of supervision, irrational of the goal setting and incompatibility of organizations. The above problems are actually technical problems after arriving at the multiple subjects governing, thus can be overcome by the improvement of relevant systems and mechanisms.^[1] We should pay more attention to whether the cooperation of multiple subjects can achieve under the target of eco-governance.

Actually, the biggest problem of the cooperation between multiple subjects is the incompatibility of interests and behavior patterns. From the view of interest orientation, the government should be the defenders of public interest, integral benefits and long-term interests. But the government's public rational might be diluted by economic rationality under the pressure of the international competition, inter-governmental competition and the lobbying from strong economic interest groups. The governmental short-sighted behaviors are common phenomenon. So the ecological governance is difficult to put on the government's main agenda. Enterprises have the natural economic rationality, so they will not participate in unprofitable activities of ecological governance. Social organizations have complex interest structure, so the internal frictions between different organizations harm the achieving of common goals. Though limited resources make it difficult to play a greater role in a short period. The citizens concern about the ecological problems, but their sight is often limited to the areas only related to their lives and scope, because of living in the market economy and individualism so long. From the view of behavior patterns, the government’s typical behavioral characteristics are

conservative, cautious, and slow. Enterprises take the mutable interests as the principle of behavior, so instability is their main feature. Social organizations have a variety of forms and behaviors. Specifically, the environmental organizations often tend to confront with the government and related enterprises, because of the conflict between their ideal and social reality. So the government and related enterprises are always keeping vigilance to the environmental organizations. Citizens' behavior swings between indifference and enthusiasm. Though these contradictions cannot be resolved in a short time, they can be relieved by establishing a long-term, sustainable, equal, open and inclusive democratically coordination mechanism. This democratic mechanism could help multiple subjects using the rational communication and thinking, transcending the limitation of individual self-interest, breaching the shackles of economic rationality, gradually forming a clear public reason, and finally setting up a solid foundation for a lasting cooperation.

5 Conclusion

The article suggests that different levels of ecological governance need different types of democratic mechanisms. The ecological governance of global level needs the democratic mechanism that can generate an authority with high degree of legitimacy and capacity of policy implementation. Ecological governance at the regional level needs to create the democratic mechanisms that can both inclusive conflict of interest and resolve the conflict of interest. The coordination of governmental departments involved in the ecological governance process requires the democratic mechanisms have well-defined division of rights and functions. The cooperation of multiple subjects involved in the ecological governance process need the democratic mechanisms that can promote the forming of public interest public reason. Certainly, these analyzes don't suggested that there are correspondence between different levels of ecological governance and different characteristics of democratic mechanisms. In fact, each level of ecological governance needs the support of the democratic mechanism with the characteristics of "authoritative", "inclusive", "responsible" and "rational". Due to the complexity of ecological governance, the solving of different problems require special institutional arrangements which will put particular emphasis on one of the characters.

In addition, it should also be noted that at any level, the liberal democracy---characterized by individualism, competitive elections, the alternation of political parties, elite politics, the confrontation of interest groups, and political indifference---is clearly not qualified for ecological governance's requirements. As discussed by Luke Martell: individualism, the pursuit of personal interests, limited government and market freedom conflict with the ecology's commitment. The solution of environmental problems required the public interests and intervention toward economic and personal freedom.^[23] Liberal democracy stress too much on personal interests, antagonistically competition, free market, which would lead to endless confrontations among special interest groups in the process of ecological governance. The necessary principles---cooperation, consultation, public interest, public reason---are difficult to have a larger developmental space in the sphere of liberal democracy. Especially in developing countries, due to lack of factors that can inhibit the defects of the liberal democratic mechanism, such as a higher level economic development, reasonable economic relations, perfect political system, effective social management, developed social organization, a higher public and cultural qualities, overemphasis on the liberal democratic mechanisms in the process of ecological management might cause the social torn and unrest, weaken and even destroy social consensus for the ecological management, finally cause irreparable damage to the social and natural ecology. In fact, ecological governance, as any other areas of governance, needs the institutions of negotiation, the companies with public concern, as well as the new regional economic community.^[24] All these cannot be given by liberal democracy. Therefore, in the process of ecological management, we need explore new democratic mechanism different from liberal democracy; the theory and practice of deliberative democracy and participatory democracy provide us many inspirations.

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