Liberal Democracy and the Environment in North America

by

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Abstract: There is a growing concern about environmental degradation in North America. Concerns about the environment have given the region a specific starting point for managing cross-border issues. The approach to managing this issue must be drawn from liberal democracy. The idea holds that everyone affected by decisions in the international arena should directly participate or have fair representation in the political process. Until liberal democracy spreads and is fully entrenched throughout North America, we will find it more difficult to articulate a coherent regional political will toward sustainable development and saving the environment. This article describes how we might better extended liberal democracy to the many realms of political interaction, including civic associations and free-market capitalism. This effort will reduce inequalities and prioritize opportunity, allowing us to build an ecological sensibility among the North American region.
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1. Introduction

There is increased awareness of the potentially serious consequences of environmental problems in North America. The supra-national character of environmental issues brings us closer to the need for a system of governance that can effectively, coherently, and proactively deal with environmental policy across national boundaries. Within and between the countries of North America there exist separate notions, goals, and priorities in realizing a common well being for society. North America is not coherent, and the present inequalities and asymmetries in national priorities prevent us from properly addressing many environmental problems. This state of affairs can only be changed through cooperation between nation-states, international organizations, and international civic associations. The core hypothesis of this paper is that only through liberal democracy will we manage to reduce inequalities, prioritize opportunities, and realize an ecologically sensible regional society.

The underlying assumption is that absolute human inequalities throughout North America must be reconciled before we can properly address environmental problems. Extending the idea of liberal democracy to the many realms of political interaction will enhance our ability to help environmental degradation in North America. Liberal democracy, if pursued justly, can help level out the profound inequalities that lead to a regional society with multiple priorities. If entrenched within the many realms of social and economic interaction, Liberal Democracy will allow citizens to better promulgate, prioritize and participate in environmental policy.
Some survivalists have argued for eco-authoritarianism, or an ecological dictatorship that uses coercion as a means in getting people to respect the environment, even at the cost of humans. This dogmatic view immediately separates humans from nature conceptually, and asserts an all knowing truth or value on the way others should live. Others argue our social affairs are the root of all environmental problems. In an evolutionary sense, however, humans and society are nature – the product of, and contingent upon, nature itself. Conceptually, you may think I am hierarchically ordering or prioritizing human existence over the environment. Morally and consequentially, however, because we are part of nature (that we cannot be separate from nature), we must fix our own problems so to better cope and help the rest of nature. Once we have dealt with humanity’s more difficult issues then we will have a better chance of helping environmental degradation. This better chance will come from humanity as a whole working together, rather than segments of society alone.

Absolute socio-economic inequalities in North America can delineate two types of societies. The following is a generalization not meant to oversimplify reality. Individuals from the two types will exist in each one of the North American countries, but a sober generalization can prove insightful when considering different priorities of the region. By generically categorizing, the U.S. and Canadian societies fall in one, and the Mexican society falls in another. The first type (U.S. and Canada) can consist of post-materialists concerned with environmentalism, feminism etc. These folks are socio-economically well off enough to take on more abstract and indirect issues like the environment. They are not immediately worried about getting their next meal or providing shelter for their children. The opposite category would include those in Mexico concerned foremost with
poverty and human development. These folks will not have issues like environmental
degradation as a priority. They will be more concerned with industrial development and
economic opportunity. When developing an approach to environmental degradation in
North America, we should keep this typology in the back of our mind to help us
understand the different perceptions and priorities among the citizens of the region.
Although, with increased integration among the countries of this region, we should
continue to see these perceptions and priorities become more alike.

In the international arena, globalization has caused the region to become more
socially, politically, culturally and economically interconnected. We have observed this
phenomenon in North America with things like free trade, migration, and other political
alliances. What must be considered in the globalization context, however, is
governments, firms, and international civil associations often make decisions that can
affect the lives of many people who have no say in international political processes.
These political decisions are often made within iron triangles that include firms,
governments, and civil associations and to often exclude the general population. We
need to bring the environmental issue closer to the people in a way in that they will want,
and be able to affect policy outcomes.

There must be a commitment to self-determination and liberal democracy here,
the idea being all those affected by any political decision should be represented in the
political process, if not directly involved in the deliberative process itself. Public
officials, formal or informal, should consider not only their electoral constituents, but
what has also been called their moral constituents, or all those “individuals who are
bound by the decisions they make, whether de jure or de facto” (Thompson 1999 pg 120).
This means having firms, governments, and civil associations, consider what priorities
different citizens of the region might have. Some constituents will have the environment
as a priority while others will have human development first. Notwithstanding, the
committed democrat must consider both points of view.

II. Liberal Democracy and Ecological Rationality

In the midst of international political issues like the environment, we must
strengthen and extend liberal democracy on many fronts. For now, democracy is the most
potent political ideology and should be polished to afford a better realization of the ideal.
In particular, growing internationalization and globalization of trade and environmental
problems require a parallel development of institutions and practices to deal with issues
of trade and the environment in a democratic fashion. Two of the primary characteristics
of liberal democracy are \(i\) use of markets in the ordering of social affairs more efficiently
and, \(ii\) public participation in shaping social and economic policies. Before exploring the
different social and economic arenas in which the ideal should be applied, let us more
fully consider what liberal democracy can mean.

A. Liberal Democratic Theory

Democracy is about government, or more aptly, governance by the people
indirectly exercised through responsive representation, or directly exercised through the
people themselves. This idea entails mutual accommodation with respect to social and
political equality for individuals. The degree to which this ideal is realized varies at the
many levels of political association, from the local to the global. The liberalism side is
concerned with the right of the individual to pursue his or her own ends, usually conceived around private property and the notion of ordering social affairs with the market. Here two strands of thought subsume under liberalism; traditional liberalism and welfare liberalism.

Traditional liberalism has its arguments grounded in terms of equality of opportunity to pursue one’s ends with little influence from the state, with primacy given to the individual rights of the citizen. John Locke and Adam Smith were two classical proponents of this theory. The second strand of liberal thought rests easier with the idea of democratic equality itself. Contemporary liberals would juxtapose equality of social condition with equality of market opportunity, giving neither primacy. They would also accept market intervention for things like redistribution, especially when it entails giving others the fair capacity to act and influence their democratic system. Welfare liberalism would maintain a reciprocal balance of ordering social affairs between private market systems, and public political systems. John Keynes can be considered an original proponent of the demand side check on markets with government intervention.

What does this have to do with ecology? It is my contention, that to effectively deal with environmental degradation, promote an ecological rationality, and generate an international political will toward sustainable development, we must embrace a more liberal democratic approach to the collective nature of environmental problems. The ability of the North American region in dealing with a problem that transcends all political borders is at stake. The supra-national character of environmental degradation

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1 It must be acknowledged that these rights can be hard to define and delimit. We must ask ourselves: ‘When does the pursuit of the individual right of opportunity begin to indirectly or directly effect those who are without opportunity’?
and its connection with economic growth, make it a prime starting point for considering how to achieve a regional society prepared to coherently deal with global issues. As I shall argue, people cannot secure a regional political will toward sustainable development, without deepening the roots of liberal democracy in our social affairs. We must do this by prioritizing opportunity for everyone in North America. Prioritizing the opportunity to participate and act in market economies and political processes.

B. Liberal Democratic Models

Let us now examine a few contemporary models of liberal democratic thought (i.e. realism, cosmopolitanism, radicalism, and liberal-internationalism), considering their relative worth in prioritizing opportunity for the underprivileged, and arriving at a proactive answer to environmental degradation. The following are contemporary models of liberal democracy that can serve as paradigms when applying the normative ideal. The fourth model discussed will draw from the first three, and adapt as the framework for which to establish a more ecologically rational political will in North America.

The first liberal democratic model is realism. Realists traditions perceive the world through a state-centric lens, giving the basis of all political actions to states. This model conceives a hierarchical ordering of states with the hegemonic state as primary, and with governance being determined by power politics. Some realists concede that there are other actors in politics, but none as determinate as the state. This risks a parochial view as to who can truly affect the political process in the international arena. It also undermines the possibility of properly including a plurality of nongovernmental organizations (NGO’s) and civil associations in the political process. When dealing with environmental problems at the international level democratically, it is essential that these
alternative actors, whether for or against the environmental project, be considered in the political process. It is important that we not conceive states as having absolute priority in world politics, and continue to search for a theoretical framework that is more pluralistic.

Held has given us a comprehensive illustration of the second model of liberal democratic thought in his work ‘Democracy and the Global Order’ (1995). Cosmopolitans reject the conception of the nation-state on the grounds that it is exclusionary, and that we must justify a global system of federalism based on the moral equality of all human beings. Further, cosmopolitans would distinguish many actors, including nation-states, firms and civil associations, at the many distinct levels of governance, from the local to the global. This is a form of world polity morally committed to cosmopolitan democratic law, namely, the autonomous right to equal participative opportunities and the entitlement capacities to democratic self-determination. (Held 1995, pg. 230) Held states that “a single, unified, international state structure ought not to be regarded as an aim” (1995 pg 230), although he comes very close to just that by prescribing independent regional parliaments along with an independent military. This may be going one step too far. Liberal democracy should be articulated foremost at lower levels political association where there already stands a large gap between the individual and representative democracy. Responsiveness and accountability in representative democracies are critical. As more and more sovereignty is ceded to regional or global governance, all the more thinner and unaccountable democracy really becomes – think of the democratic deficit in the EU. Held may have underplayed the need for a more participatory structure in world politics. When pursuing global
environmental issues, it is essential to build liberal democracy as democratically thick and participatory as possible. More on this possibility follows in the section on civil society.

Let us briefly consider radicalism. This stream of thought is built on the commitment to liberal free-market capitalism in tandem with skeptical perceptions of the elite decision-making processes involved in representative democracy. Its traditions lie with direct democracy and liberty. Radicalism is skeptical of top-down elite decision-making politicians, and finds they are often the ones farthest removed from localized environmental degradation. Radicalism would leave everything to the market and direct, deliberative, or other forms of participatory democracy. The explicit difficulties here are the social polarization or inequalities caused by free markets and unbridled capitalism, and the limitations faced in the realization of regional direct democracy. We can draw from the ideal of participatory democracy by trying to implement large-scale direct democracy with new technologies, however far from an accomplished reality this may yet be. Radicalism can further fail in the face of asymmetries in individual autonomy by leaving unchecked markets with too little social coordination.

Finally, what McGrew has called liberal-internationalism, I will refer to as the fourth and appropriate theoretical model in the extension of liberal democracy (1997 pg 17). Here world politics are more appropriately conceived as “polyarchy” – a decentralized and pluralistic system (1997 pg 17). With a touch of realism, the state is still considered important but not given primacy; with a little cosmopolitanism, equal participative opportunities are a priority but global parliaments are not; and with a bit of radicalism, participatory democracy is helpful although market capitalism must be appropriately checked. Politically, this model of democratic thought should be considered
the backdrop to establishing an ecological rationality and generating a political will toward sustainable development. Specifically, North America should adopt this model as its liberal democratic foundation.

The liberal democratic ideal must extended to all regions throughout North America and other regions of the world. As the union of liberal democratic states spreads, the inequalities that impinge on individual opportunity will extinguish and self-determination will bring a more acute awareness towards the environment. All citizens should have a basic education, health care, and a minimal income so they may enjoy the “entitlement capacities” and “access avenues” that are rudimentary to the idea of market-liberty, autonomy, self-determination, and democracy itself.

III. Civil Society and Civic Associations

Civil society is that segment of society layered between the individual and representative democracy. At least on the international scale, this is a relatively new phenomenon. It represents an important development in world politics, especially in terms of environmental issues and civil associations (Cohen & Rogers, 1992 pg 393). Realists would argue that the civil society school of thought gives to much weight to civic associations in world politics, while on the other hand, civil sociatarians would claim

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2 Immanual Kant offers the best conceptual guidance here. ”Perpetual Peace” written in 1795, predicts the ever-widening pacification of the liberal pacific union, explains that pacification, and at the same time suggests way liberal states are not pacific in their relations with nonliberal states....His central claim is that a natural evolution will produce “a harmony from the very disharmony of men against their will”... “Asocial sociability” draws men together to fulfill needs for security and material welfare as it drives them into conflicts over the distribution and control of social products’ – Doyle, Michael (1997). Kant, Liberal Legacies, and Foreign Affairs in Brown et. al. (ed.) ’Debating the Democratic Peace’. Cambridge: MIT Press 1997. (pgs 21-23)
realists give to much attention to the state. To simplify the case, they both affect each other in a reciprocal manner that should allow us to heed the importance of both. Wapner imagines this nicely: ‘Because the boundaries between the state and civil society are elusive, porous, and mobile, when actions take place in one realm – although they have a distinct quality of efficacy about them – they have consequences for the other’ (1995 pg 525). He further contends that pressure from transnational environmental activist groups (TEAG’s) must be taken at face value for determining an ecological sensibility and signaling ‘cognitive, affective, and evaluative shifts in societies’ (1995 pgs 514-515).

Wapner’s focus is independent of the arguments about accountability and relative causal weight within and among associations. At stake is the internal accountability of international civil organizations that pursue politics of direct action, and the democratic arbitration between those civil associations who have little capacity to act and those who have much capacity to act. Here liberal democracy needs to become more explicitly extended to the realm of civil society. The following will discuss both issues, accountability and arbitration between associations.

The problems of accountability within associations can be addressed with a more participatory form of liberal democracy. The nature of civic associations is mutual volunteerism and self-determination. This implies that each individual volunteering their time or resources to an association can only do so with mutual respect for other opinions in the group. One should not use the group to arrive at ends specified only by a small part of that group, much less a single individual. Likewise, a TEAG cannot deliver a decision to plug up industrial discharge pipes in the name of the people they represent without

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3 Held (1995 pg 223) states these as universal values, rights intrinsic to the democratic process.
proper deliberation and representation within the group itself. Complementary to representative democracy, Dryzek has proposed such a communicative or discursive model of democracy that could enhance accountability within and among TEAG’s. In reference to extending democracy to the international system, he makes a clear point:

‘...recent thinking argues that the essence of democratic legitimacy is to be found not in voting or representation of persons interests, but rather in deliberation. In this light an outcome is legitimate to the extent its production has involved authentic deliberation on the part of the people subject to it. Thus deliberation or communication is the central feature of democracy. Such a discursive or communicative model of democracy is particularly conducive to international society, because unlike other models of democracy, it can downplay the problem of boundaries.’ (1999 pg 44).

This model provides a normative means for helping us move towards discourses like sustainable development, among not only civil society but governmental agencies as well. Until both a more representative and participatory democracy becomes deepened within civil associations, however, states will always be more legitimate in their actions. The state, in this case, can better represent the collective will and evenly distribute risks involved with the outcomes of its’ actions. This is not to rule out the increased influence of participatory democratic civic organizations, which could essentially thicken democracy by helping bridge the gap between the individual and representative democracy.

The second issue about the relative causal weight of associations can be tricky. Different associations, from environmental to economic, are at best, committed to very separate ideas about what they regard as important priorities in realizing the “good life”. When any one association has more influence on the process of world politics than some other, it can be labeled generally undemocratic, more specifically non-pluralistic. Even
with more members, a group cannot claim to represent a larger segment of society
without being internally accountable, one of the basic democratic tenants. Further, the
democratic arbitration between associations and the control of empowering resources
would be necessary to make sure some are not too powerful or monolithic. Thompson
states that citizens need to make collective decisions about matters that affect the whole
of society, and that the civil socitarian school of thought is in danger of purchasing more
democracy for some segments of society at the price of less democracy in the whole of
society (1999 pg 116). The successful arbitration between those international
associations with a large resource base and those with a small base would require a world
polity dangerously powerful in terms of the capacities to control the empowering
resources of groups. Bellow the nation-state, associational structures can theoretically be
arbitrated within and between networks of groups, playing a strictly supplemental and
complementary role to representative democracy (see Hirst 1994). On the nation-state
level the national government can effectively and legally arbitrate the resources of these
groups via taxes and regulations.

When making reference to the powers of civic associations and the need to
arbitrate them on the international scale, it is important to mention direct action. Direct
action can involve illicit acts of civil disobedience carried out by TEAG’s like
Greenpeace and Earth First, chiefly aimed at generating a deeper ecological awareness in
society. With no democratic check on this behavior, they explicitly infringe upon the
liberty of others to pursue, namely, economic opportunity. The ideals of liberty and
equality are difficult to reconcile, but if civil associations embrace a participatory
democracy from within, and the liberal democratic good (autonomy, due entitlement
capacities, and self-determination) can be deepened in the nature of collective organization and extended to the many regions of the world, then one can expect the ascension of civil associations from lesser industrialized countries (ones concerned with human development and opportunity) to balance the influence of powerful TEAG’s on an international scale. This is not arbitration *per se*, but rather an effort to extend, with the spread of the liberal democratic union, resource capacities to other associations that might influence world politics and the priorities of society. Without a regional state, one with revenue raising capabilities and a coercive hand, true arbitration cannot be realized in the North American international arena.

In sum, civil society has become more salient in world politics, although the degree of this saliency is at best a moot point among political theorists. What is more, the well-founded, hotly debated TEAG’s must be observed through the lens of accountability and internally embrace democracy to become more legitimate in their actions. The need for arbitration between associations can be successfully underplayed if liberal democracy continues to spread to the many states of the world, and alternative civic organizations evolve to check the balance of power in global politics. Environmental associations are certainly beneficial, especially when, as Wapner stresses, they ‘signal a cognitive, affective, and evaluative shift in societies’ (1995 pg 515). The challenge lies in spreading liberal democracy to the very political realm of civil society, so that the pressure they apply to international systems reflect the genuine will of the citizens of the world. This will allow us to determine an international political will towards sustainable development, only after giving individuals the proper capacities to affect the mood of society.
IV. Free Market Economics and Environmentalism

Economics is generally concerned with the allocation of scarce resources. The problems of environmental degradation are clearly connected to economic growth and the negative externalities it can present. Of course the environment can be helped with economic growth though developments like electric cars and nuclear energy, but most degradation that currently exists can be attributed to previous industrial growth. In this section I will address two issues, free-market environmentalism with the U.S. clean air act of 1990, and the general democratization of economic systems. The first issue deals with the 1990 Clean Air Act in the U.S., an initial effort to abate pollution problems with market-capitalism and the extension of the liberalist notion of private property to the environment. The second issue is the democratization of economic systems, to include the global financial institutions that determine the terms of global capital flow, as well as the firms and corporations that act in this context. If compelling, I hope to underline the importance of both liberalism and democracy in economic affairs. Both these ideas are important for determining where society is and ought to be going with the environmental project.

In an effort to reduce environmental regulatory costs, the U.S. government passed the 1990 Clean Air Act that extended the notion of private property to the environment. Americans could thus sell that property to the highest bidder, and the let the logic of the market sort things out (Power et al. 1992). The Chicago Board of Trade now has a market for firms to trade pollutant credits, and the Act has faced criticism for the decision
to put a price on the environment. The primary argument for ‘free-market environmentalism’ is the fact that it could reduce the cost of bureaucratically regulating environmental pollution. The idea consists of arriving at a limit for pollution on the level of the nation-state, placing a price on this limit, parceling shares of this price, and trading them among polluting firms and/or associations that want to prevent pollution. Some firms will find it cheaper to buy a filter for their emissions (usually required by government regulations) rather than credits to pollute, either way the price of saving the air or environment is passed to the consumer/citizen. Of course there will still need to be regulatory policy to prevent severe localized degradation, but what we can’t forget is that, with an economic incentive to the firm, this gives “green” civil associations the opportunity to purchase these credits to help prevent pollution. Consequently, the project should be adapted in Mexico and Canada as a possible way to avoid economic waste in terms of bureaucratic regulation in North America, and to create a legal, market oriented means for TEAG’s to directly prevent pollution throughout the region.

On a practical level, when incentives with markets reduce waste, then we must sidestep our moral barriers that prevent us from simply wanting to put a price on ‘the right to pollute’. How hard could it be to say -“Yes there should be a limit to pollution”- and then go from there. Goodin has compared the selling of environmental indulgences with the medieval Roman Catholic Church who sold religious indulgences – rendering wrongs right, selling what is not yours or cannot be sold, etc. (Goodin 1994). This may conflate the ethical difficulty of placing value or worth on the environment and religion, with the pragmatic and consequential compromises involved with free-market
environmentalism. The case should be sufficiently clear that liberal private market systems can lead to more efficient processes of handling social affairs.

Efficiency, however, is not always the answer, and consumer preferences do not reflect citizen preferences. When it comes to economics, there must be a balance struck between efficiency and equality, competition and coordination, and in a certain sense, between liberalism and democracy. This proper democratization of economic systems helps articulate the citizen preference and is my second point.

Firstly, the liberal democratic ideal should be spread to eventually engulf all states, thus affirming the right of opportunity and self-determination to all individuals. As liberal democracy spreads to more nation-states, one could presume there would exist that many more safe havens for actual or potential economic investment, and fewer havens for investors to profit at the expense of individual autonomy. Fair-trade based on comparative advantage would be the backdrop of this stage. This entails free trade in a non-zero-sum game. No country should benefit at the expense of another. A common commitment to autonomy and democratic rights (education, health-care, and basic income) would compromise liberty only insofar as it enabled all citizens to participate in his or her democracy and enjoy access routes to the capitalist system. These rights or provisions at the state level will increase the cost of labor around the world, but seems to be one of the necessary ‘trade-offs’ between efficiency and equality. Some citizens’ autonomy must come at the cost of others liberty. The bottom line is the ability to

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4 Market-liberalism does not reflect political values, but rather individual preferences. Citizen preferences are aspirations for the collective good, while consumer preferences reflect individual wants. Sagoff claims that “because people are not the rational people described in theories, we can only establish the citizen preference through the democratic means” (Sagoff 1988 pg 412).
generate an international *political will* to save the environment, something impossible with the current state of inequalities.

Secondly, more deeply entrenched democracy within the firm or multi-national corporation (i.e. MNC’s) who, along with governments, determine the terms of production and investment; and more profoundly entrenched democracy within intergovernmental financial institutions (i.e. IMF, NAFTA, WTO, & The World Bank) that determine the terms of aid and trade, could certainly pave the way for a more transparent and accountable international economic polity. These institutions, which have an influence on the labor, environmental, and social policy of governments, should reflect the genuine views of the citizens in these nations. This is not to undermine the need and ability of liberal-market capitalism in ordering social affairs, especially on the microeconomic level – far from it. Free trade based on comparative advantage, transparency, and accountability is the issues that bring heated debate. What is at stake is a balance between competition and coordination in market affairs, precisely because social institutions like governments and their agencies are legitimately built on economic affairs, just as economic affairs are legitimately built on social goods that governments provide (e.g. education for trained labor; health-care for able-bodied workers; basic income for access avenues to the means of private production). Likewise, the entrenchment of these social goods or rights, along with other political and civil rights can be the first steps toward a liberal democratic society that can effectively understand the importance of the environment.

I have tried to outline the importance of both liberalism and democracy in the realm of economics. These ideas are adversely inscribed into society and often difficult to
reconcile. Liberal markets can improve efficiency and reduce economic waste, but this efficiency must at times be traded for democratic equality, just as market-competition must be checked with proper democratic social coordination within and among firms and intergovernmental financial institutions. Thus, liberal democracy should be extended to the realm of economics, prospectively reducing inequalities and undemocratic practices that prevent a society from properly considering environmental degradation.

Specifically, the prominent issue of free trade is key to growth and expansion of economic opportunity, and free trade in North America has made great progress during the 1990’s. Agreements, however, on free trade in the region must also abide by the terms of efficiency and equality as well as liberty and democracy. Let us now examine some aspects of free trade in the North American region specifically, and determine whether it is built around liberal democracy entailing the possibility of greater environmental responsibility.

V. North American Free Trade and Environmental Responsibility

The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) displays a unique regional model of institutional relationships within politics and economics. NAFTA is a free trade agreement between three American nations, originating with Canada and the United States and now including Mexico. The agreement lowers tariff barriers to increase economic trade and facilitate greater integration between national economies. Free trade remains essential to continued economic development in North America, but as stated earlier, environmental degradation is an unintended consequence and negative externality of this growth.
Again, the supra-national character of environmental degradation brings us closer to the need for a North American regional policy that can effectively, coherently, and proactively deal with issues like environmental degradation. In terms of economic development, agreements like NAFTA are about more than trade. They are about many political actors in an international arena influencing the very conditions of our association, and an incoherent regional society caused by inequalities or asymmetries in national economic development can prevent us from properly addressing environmental issues. In the many realms of free trade and institutional governance, liberal democracy must be more deeply entrenched to reduce asymmetries and prioritize integration. Only then can we realize a regional society capable of disseminating an ecological sensibility.

Throughout history, trade has been an important factor in human development and regional cooperation between states. More recently, with ill respect to the environment, trade has facilitated expanding markets, industrialization, and political integration on a larger scale. Today, regional expansion and growth within NAFTA often invokes negative critique concerning its immediate ability to deal with environmental problems. An example of these concerns includes economic and social disparities between states that, at times, undermine any one state’s attempt to regulate their own environmental degradation. There are specific concerns within NAFTA that weak environmental regulatory and enforcement policies in Mexico lure pollutant firms from the United States and Canada. With freer trade laws, these firms move to Mexico to produce at a lower cost with greater harm to the environment. This subverts stricter U.S. and Canadian domestic environmental regulations to the terms of an international trade agreement whose nature favors industry and capitalist markets. Incongruent regulatory practices can
prevent society from properly considering the extent of environmental degradation. Formulation of these trade agreements and/or amendments should not only be transparent, but also include active public support and participation, along with holding elite negotiators accountable for the outcome and environmental review of final trade agreements (Cox et al. 2001). Transparency, accountability, and participation should be central in the democratic approach to further economic integration in North America.

Fortunately, NAFTA is a trade agreement constructed on the backdrop of the growing sustainable development rhetoric in the early 1990’s. According to the International Institute for Sustainable Development, “sustainable development focuses on improving the quality of life for all the Earth’s citizens without increasing the use of natural resources beyond the capacity of the environment to supply them indefinitely” (IISD 2001). The North American Free Trade Agreement makes a conscious effort to deal with concerns about the environment while integrating capitalist markets with free trade. Examples include expressed aims within the agreement to promote sustainable development. This entails initiating cross border environmental principles, enforcing environmental law and standards, as well as mechanisms to finance and build infrastructure necessary to minimize environmental damage from new economic growth (Knight 1995 pg 3). International institutions like the North American Commission for Environmental Cooperation also exist (NACEC 2001). This institution will undoubtedly play an integral role in future cooperative environmental measures by addressing regional environmental concerns, helping prevent potential trade and environmental conflicts, and promoting the effective enforcement of environmental law. Additionally, there has been a growing trend of legalism in regional trade pacts. This provides for the Secretariat or an
impartial third party arbiter to issue binding rulings on alleged treaty violations.

According to Article 2002, Chapter 20 of the North American Free Trade Agreement, the Secretariat is responsible for the administration of dispute settlement provisions, and support for various committees and working groups (NAFTA Secretariat 2001). These are a just few examples of environmental benefits the North American Free Trade Agreement and cooperative economic harmonization may promise for the future.

The possibility of cooperative economic harmonization within NAFTA serves as a catalyst for a more profound and articulate regional political will. Economic integration will command similar interests and commonalties, and politically, the will to embrace an ecological rationality will become more evident. Economic and political regionalism must precede a solid political will toward environmental awareness throughout North America. The approach to this integration must be drawn on the ideas of liberal democracy and sustainable development. Integration will downplay asymmetries between these national societies and economies, affording a greater ecological sensibility. What follows could be a regional model for other regions, possibly the entire world.

**VI. Conclusions**

Conclusively, one must consider the nature of environmental problems before extending liberal democracy in an effort enhance our ability to deal with this issue. In this light, liberal democracy must be constructed as a model of democratic thought committed to a more egalitarian approach to the collective nature of regional and global issues. Primacy should not be given to either liberalism or democracy, but rather each should be weighed equally against the other in ordering social affairs. From this it follows
that the liberal democratic ideal should be extended to the many realms of political association. Before properly addressing the environmental problematic, we must address the problems of humanity. The difficulties of humanity can be prospectively appeased with the extension of the liberal democratic pacific union. This could help ensure all citizens have the right to education, health care, and a basic income so that they can enjoy the entitlement capacities and access avenues that are rudimentary to the idea of market-liberty and democracy.

Among the forces that determine world politics and the mood of society, civil associations have become recognized and criticized. In the political realm of civil society, democracy could afford to be more entrenched within and among civil associations (TEAG’s) so they can become more legitimate in their actions. Until so, states will always represent the collective will of societies better. However, we should not underplay the value of transnational environmental activist groups in disseminating an ecological rationality.

Finally, by outlining the importance of both liberalism and democracy in economic affairs, I hope to have made it clear in dealing with human inequalities and then the environment, the liberal democratic ideal must be first embraced. If we are to create an ecological sensibility among ourselves, then this ideal must be embraced not only in North America, but also around the world.
References:


