Democracy’s Plight in a Limited World – An Unconventional Perspective

This paper approaches sustainability as the most important issue of our times. Sustainability is sine quo non. Hence, liberal values are also dependent on our ability to achieve sustainable politics. However, rather than enabling greener politics, liberal values are often barriers to the curtailment of environmental destruction. Not only are many values in tension, for instance convenience and security, liberal democracies are also self-destructive, destroying the fundamental basis on which life on Earth depends. Studies show that democracy is not better at protecting ecological integrity than autocracy (Wurster 2013). The study of ethics should not be blind to connected implications.

Arguably a liberal democracy could work, if the citizenry was committed to an eco-friendly lifestyle (Wissenburg 2006), but such citizenry does not exist. The dependency on the citizen’s voluntary participation in greener politics is an underestimated pitfall. Bowersox admits: “One of the other conclusions that we must accept is that if we are going to espouse democracy, we have to be willing to lose” (2002:Loc. 5968). Yet, this means exactly what Jonas rejected as unethical: Gambling with something that does not belong to us (1984:77ff.). Survival cannot be subject to negotiations and luck. The possibility of losing everything demands exceptional means and efforts in Jonas‘ view. One can live without the highest good, but not with the biggest evil. A world where you cannot breath the air, is more totalitarian than any dictatorship could ever be. Human rights law does not know a human right to democracy (Petersen 2009:59). The majority of humans as well as non-humans throughout time and space do not enjoy equal consideration and are even seriously harmed by democratic decisions. The current situation cannot be sustained, since it is too late for avoiding climate change. It is already unfolding. Nature as the primary common good has not been protected. This is of major significance. Green thought has to admit such widespread findings. They make a case for guardianship.

The discussion needs to take tradeoffs into account and openly consider that liberalism and democracy in a limited world might undermine themselves, and therefore have to be considered as dangerous ideologies themselves. We must keep in mind the new qualities of the Anthropocene and this paper tries to widen the discourse by adding an unconventional perspective.

Keywords: climate change, democracy, guardianship, liberalism, tradeoffs

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