

Toward a morality of increasing moderation

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Abstract

This paper summarizes some provisional conclusions of three interrelated historical-sociological studies on 'economization' and 'ecologization'. Special attention is paid to the role status aspirations play in these processes. The focus is on ecologization, its conditions and obstacles.

1. ECONOMIZATION AND ECOLOGIZATION AS CIVILIZING PROCESSES

Current environmental problems are to a considerable extent caused by ecologically unbridled economic growth. Central problem of the first study is what social driving forces are behind this type of growth and to what extent they obstruct the control of environmental degradation. The answer to this question requires the elaboration of two theoretical concepts: 'economization' and 'ecologization'.

Economization refers to a long-term social process in the course of which a growing number of societies turned into relatively peacefully competing regimes for generating wealth. For the societies involved this meant that 'economic' ways of doing and thinking gradually penetrated more and more spheres of life including that of the state.

Economization might be considered a civilizing process for two related reasons. First, 'economic' activities were increasingly looked upon as more 'civilized' and prestigious than the extraction of surplus under the threat of violence, predation or war. Second, the process of economization brought about a growing social pressure towards self-control as well as an increasing control over nature. In the course of time, however, the resulting increase in affluence led to a relaxation of standards of frugality in the sphere of consumption.

Economization implied an enormous increase in the division of labour. This meant in practice that a growing number of people were living and working in cities where they were not immediately confronted with the ecological effects of their activities. They could even cherish the illusion not to be dependent on nature any more. In reality, however, the increasing control over nature that made the urban-industrial way of life possible implied a growing, though less directly felt, dependence on the environment. The illusion of being released from ecological constraints explains the long-term short-sightedness of 'economized' societies with respect to the ecological effects of unbridled intensive growth.

The term 'ecologization' refers to a re-awakening to these effects - the development of

what came to be called 'environmental awareness' - as well as to attempts to keep the nature of human activity and the numbers of the human species within constraints considered 'ecologically acceptable'. In a way, the process can be looked upon as a continuation of economization because ecologization implies striving for optimum welfare within ecological constraints.

In the twentieth century, social pressures toward more 'ecological self-control' have increased considerably. The second study deals with an important aspect of this long-term development.

2. THE RISE AND EFFECTIVENESS OF NON-GOVERNMENTAL ENVIRONMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS IN THE NETHERLANDS

From the beginning of this century, private organizations made efforts to protect specific parts of the Dutch landscape, flora and fauna, such as the Organization for the Protection of Birds and, most notably, the Organization for the Conservation of Nature Monuments. They focused on limited goals, the conservation of specific sites and/or of certain biological species. They were largely made up by members of the higher classes, whose rather effective political lobbying was mostly done in a discreet way. At the same time, they promoted their goals publicly by trying to get attached to it high status and prestige, as the name 'nature monuments' already suggests. This image-forming strategy can be summarized by saying that they sought to project a positive, 'high culture' image. Nature was beautiful, and should consequently be preserved. This motivated many people to associate with their cause.

Although today the leadership of Nature Monuments expresses discontent with the current situation, the organization has been highly successful in terms of its original goals. The idea of protected areas has almost completely been accepted by the Dutch public (which explains why they are so easily overlooked). Such sites have steadily grown in size and numbers. In the 1980s, membership sharply increased and by 1994, its paying following is the largest of all ecological organizations in the Netherlands.

By contrast, many sections of the ecological movement that came up in the 1960s had very wide-ranging aims, which included major changes in consumption as well as incisive societal change. Their campaigns were characterized by a rather informal code of conduct. Such activists tended to sound the alarm and projected an image of their goal which up to today is seen by many as an abhorrent example (the 'goat's woollen socks' image). For instance, the organization Environmental Defense (Milieudefensie) continually prophesied doom and gloom if its advice would not be heeded. Yet, their positively phrased 'Action Plan Sustainable Netherlands' attracted a great deal of attention at home as well as abroad.

This leads to the conclusion that those organizations which addressed far-reaching issues like personal general ecological awareness and moderation chose a rather ineffective strategy to attract followers to their cause. By contrast, their not so spectacular predecessors reached their less ambitious goals by a rather effective strategy. Although sounding the alarm is a necessary component of efforts to stimulate ecological awareness, positively phrased campaigns to stimulate specific forms of moderation are likely to be more successful than alarmist approaches, and should clearly be kept separated. In addition, the ability to exercise influence at the highest level of decision making, including

getting public support of highly-placed citizens, not only verbal but also in practice, may be helpful to spread forms of ecological moderation. The third study deals with clues for these and other forms of moderation in consumption, especially in the Netherlands.

3. CONSUMPTION AND STRATIFICATION

The striving for the maintenance and improvement of social status is one of the primary driving forces underlying the continuing increase in consumption. The same drive, however, may also lead to an increasing moderation of consumption. In search of feasible solutions for environmental degradation, the third study focuses on the counterforces to the growth of consumption.

Broadly speaking, sociological research reveals a positive relationship between power, wealth and prestige on the one hand, and the quantity of consumption on the other. In addition, a 'trickle down-effect' has been frequently observed. Patterns of consumption and consumer goods that were initially reserved for the members of privileged groups spread out to society at large. In this way holidays by air, cars and eating meat every day trickled down as did less tangible elements such as sensitivity to art and nature.

High status, however, does not always coincide with conspicuous consumption. Historical-sociological research indicates that the members of privileged groups have time and again imposed restrictions on each other and on themselves. For example, in situations of rivalry between groups with economic power on the one hand and groups that possess principally cultural power on the other, the latter frequently tend to distinguish themselves by consumption that bears witness to self-control, tact and good taste. Moreover, whenever consumer goods become more widespread, their status-conferring character diminishes and from that moment on moderation might become prestigious.

Closer analysis of research into the development of smoking and eating habits since the Second World War demonstrates that status has played an important part in pushing back smoking and eating fat food in industrial societies. The spread of nonsmoking and health food are typical examples of the effectiveness of the trickle down-effect.

Interviews with members of high-status groups who practise forms of restraint which are not (yet) common indicate that they meet with growing social esteem. However, various sorts of environmentally friendly restraint do not seem to add much to social prestige. This may change, though, as a result of extensive attention in the media and the efforts of government and industry.

People's preferences for moderation in different areas are interrelated. They are part of a more general status-related morality in which striving for self-control, responsibility and quality are at the centre. In most cases environmental concerns appear to be not the main motivation. Analyses of secondary resources demonstrate, for instance, that the educated hardly refrain from consumption that causes excessive emissions of carbon dioxide. Their environmental concern in this respect is still mainly symbolic though communicatively significant. But then, the anxiety about the greenhouse effect is relatively recent and still controversial. The fact that educated people are over-represented among the members of environmental organizations and buyers of environmentally more friendly products shows at least their willingness to do something for the environment. So there seems to be a potential for change here.

However, as the report shows, the problem remains that the political-economic regime,

which created the conditions for the beginning ecologization of society, continues to be permeated with strong social pressures obstructing that very same process. Nevertheless, some support has been found for the hypothesis that under specific conditions an appeal to status may be effective in strengthening ecological regimes.