SUBPOLITICS

Ecology and the Disintegration of Institutional Power

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A conventional view of politics is oriented toward the rule-directed struggle between parties for privileges and levers of power. The ecological issue underlines the need for a more differentiated analysis of politics. In the world risk society, politics is made in various realms of subpolitics, whether it is in the firm, the laboratory, at the gas station, or in the supermarket. New types of conflict emerge and new coalitions become thinkable. Subpolitics thus questions the status of existing systems, calls for a rethinking of the various schemes of classification according to which people are accustomed to perceive their organizational environment, and asks for the invention of new institutional ways to deal with environmental risk.

The concept of the political in the nation state has no clear boundaries between politics and nonpolitics. Politics exist and govern the political system. Outside of the officially classified political sphere—in business, science, technical laboratories, and in private life—there is a great deal of activity, arguing, bargaining, deception, separating, uniting, loving, and betrayal, but none of that is not done according to the legitimate rules of formal politics; there is no mandate, no party organization, and no dependence on the consent of the governed. Even if the influence of the formal political system shrinks, politicians and political scientists continue to look for the political in the formal political system and only in that system. If it should turn out that for some reason no one holds power in that system and that even the most respected powers that be are only simulating power, then the diagnosis reads "ungovernability" and we react accordingly.

But why can or should the political be at home or take place only in the political system? Who says that politics are possible only in the forms and terms of governmental, parliamentary, and party politics? Perhaps the truly political disappears in and from the political system and reappears, changed and generalized, in a form that remains to be comprehended and developed, as *sub(system)politics* (Beck, 1992) in all the other fields of society.

My thesis is that opportunities for alternative action are opening up in all fields of action—technology, medicine, law, the organization of work—under the pressure of changed challenges and fundamental convictions. The old industrial consensus built into the social system is encountering new and different fundamental convictions: ecological, feminist, and many others. Technocracy ends when alternatives erupt in the technoeconomic process and polarize it. The ecological crisis is a case in point. As soon as some organizations take up what could be called

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"ecological modernization," alternative lines of action become thinkable. When these alternatives become professional and profitable, dividing professions, founding careers, and opening markets, possibly even on a global scale, thus dividing the power bloc of business, they permit and even require new types of conflicts and coalitions between and within institutions, parties, interest groups, and publics of all types, and as this happens the image of the aloof self-referentiality of social systems breaks up. They become malleable. Just like social classes, social systems and unitary organizations fade away in the wake of reflexive modernization (Beck, Giddens, & Lash, 1994). Their existence comes to depend on decision making and legitimation, and they become changeable. Alternative opportunities for action thus are the downfall of systems independent of individuals. This is not meant as a threat by any means, only as a diagnosis, perfectly value free, even with a bit of regret over so much destruction.

To be sure, to the extent it behaves peacefully or can be kept peaceful, the political will continue to take place according to the democratic concept of industrial modernity that is exclusively a rules-directed struggle between parties for privileges and levers of power. The objectives of this industrial democracy are economic growth, full employment, social security, and the succession of power in the sense of a change of parties or personnel. This is democracy and this is how it takes place and is implemented. Politics does not renovate or transform the government system by transferring decision-making powers to interest groups on one hand and to global agents on the other. Politics in the structure and rules system of the nation state amounts to keeping and protecting the established democratic and economic rules of the game, not setting off for a new land of political, even globally political, forces and a global risk society. The political is comprehended and operated as a rule-directed, rule-applying, but not a rule-changing, much less a rule-inventing, politics; it is a variation in the execution of politics but not a politics of politics.

Still, the ecological crisis and the growing awareness that we indeed live in a global risk society gives food for thought. Even if no one can sincerely say that he or she believes that the reformation of a natural economy of self-destruction into a global and democratic civilization is succeeding, it will still be possible to quickly reach agreement that the existing outmoded institutions simply will not do. If one no longer wishes to close one's eyes to this, then it is necessary to abandon the objectives of status quo politics, or at least to open, expand, rethink, and recompose them. Then, one has already arrived at the renaissance of politics.

At the turn of the 19th century Kant posed the question, How is knowledge possible? Today, two centuries later, the parallel question is, How is political design possible? It is no coincidence that this raises an overarching question that ties together art and politics. Beyond nature, God, altars, truth, causality, ego, id, and superego begins the "art of living," as the late Foucault called it, or the art of the self-design or renaissance of politics as a fundamental universal condition of human existence. Without a doubt, no age of hope or paradise is dawning. Reflexive modernization is the age of uncertainty and ambivalence, which combines the constant threat of disasters on an entirely new scale with the possibility and necessity to reinvent our political institutions and invent new ways of conducting politics at social "sites" that we previously considered unpolitical.

To make sense of this institutional crisis we should first examine the nature of our institutions. I will therefore first analyze the relationship between individual and system in some detail and then turn to consider the way in which the ecological issue challenges the traditional functioning of institutions.

The time has passed when it was possible to earn great credit or applause with extreme alternatives. This is not the time for discussing the liberation of the individual from the system. We all know too well that we constantly reproduce the social system with its successes and mistakes in our daily actions. Yet even if it is not the time for the great alternative scheme of action, perhaps it is the system of classification—which we use in our daily lives and in our organizations—that calls for explicit attention. Today, everything comes down to a mixture of the two standpoints of individual and system, and the controversies ignite over where the priorities should lie and how the issues of the opposing perspective appear or are suppressed in one's own argumentation. In the words of Mary Douglas (1991),[1]

> To know how to resist the classifying pressures of our institutions, we would like to start an independent classificatory exercise. Unfortunately, all the classifications we have for thinking are provided ready-made, along with our social life. For thinking about society, we have at hand the categories we use as members of society speaking to each other about ourselves. . . . No matter on what level of society we move, social classifications are always available; that is already too strong a statement—they form the background and horizon in which we see and judge ourselves and the others. Let us pick out domestic life and consider "the roles of children, adults, males and females." [Immediately], we automatically reproduce the scheme of authority and the division of labor in the home, but it will be very different if an Indian or an American is thinking. . . . Or we may start by taking the roles least involved in social organization, say tramps, and move from the periphery towards the centers of influence. Or we may start with new babies and move up the age structure. In each case we are adopting the categories used by our administrators for collecting taxes, making population censuses, and estimating the need for schools or prisons. Our minds are running on the old treadmill already. How can we possibly think of ourselves in society except by using the classifications established in our institutions. If we turn to the various social scientists, we find that their minds are still more deeply enthralled. Their professional subject matter is cast in administrative categories. [In the categories of legal and administrative control], we find people neatly labeled according to levels of ability, and find thinking classed as rational, insane, criminal, and criminally insane. The work of classifying that is already done for us is performed as a service to instituted professions. [But institutions do not just produce labels], the labels stabilize the flux of social life and even create to some extent the realities to which they apply. . . . This process Hacking calls "making up people" by labeling them . . . "the sheer proliferation of labels during the nineteenth century may have engendered vastly more kinds of people than ever the world knew before." . . . As fast as new medical categories (hitherto unimagined) were invented, or new criminal or sexual or moral categories, new kinds of people spontaneously came forward in hordes to accept the labels and to live accordingly. The responsiveness to new labels suggests extraordinary readiness to fall into new slots and to let selfhood be redefined . . . people are not merely re-labeled. . . . The new people behave quite differently than ever they did before. (p. 124)

"Thought strives to become deed, the word to become flesh," wrote Heinrich Heine (1981). "The world is the signature of the word. Take note of this, you proud men of action. You are nothing but servants to the men of thought, who have often marked out all your deeds precisely for you even in their most humble silence" (p. 95). Classifications are like institutions; this is a fundamental premise of functionalistic sociology, that the social must be explained from the social, not the individual, according to the classical formula in which Emile Durkheim encapsu-

lated this sociological method. Yet it must be asked whether this shaping and binding force of the social does not contradict precisely those things sociology has recognized and emphasized as the core of modernity: pluralization, individualization, construction, decidability, reflection, and discursivity. After the large-group categories such as clan culture, estates, and classes (the concepts with which modernity arose), the concept of the social system must be subjugated to the principles of modernity in a theory of reflexive modernization. I shall attempt this by turning around the question and inquiring once again into the social conditions for the rise and fall of the modern metaphysics of sovereign subject-free systems. The subject-oriented counterquestion is, Under what conditions do individuals create in their thought and action the social realities of systems that seem to be independent of individuals? And conversely, Under what conditions does the predominance and hyper-reality of social systems become fictitious because the consensus forms and formulas that justified the supremacy of the systems over subjects are missing, or fail? In other words, the question of how systems make systems possible is replaced by the question of how individuals produce the fiction of a system. The presumption is that the autonomy of social systems presupposes consent to this autonomy, or, to put it more strongly, the production and reproduction of the independence of systems from individuals takes place in the thought and action of individuals. The question of the self-referentiality of systems is replaced by the question of the dependence of system realities and fictions on culture.

System formation is power formation, but without violent means. The associated questions did not come up so long as unquestioned consent to system formation was culturally available, or more precisely, "for sale" on the labor market as (religiously-based) achievement consciousness (Calvinism, Protestant ethic, professional orientation, professional pride, motivation for social advancement, job orientation, and so on). Max Weber and Karl Marx developed two different arguments as to how this generation and use of cultural certainties can be protected for the autonomy of bureaucracies, organizations, industrial firms, or capitalism in general.

Weber's famed study, "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism," is a bridge from certain religious dogmas (specifically the innerworldly asceticism of Calvinism) to the professional ethos (the reshaping of the world according to the maxims of calculability and economic profit). The "methodical way of life," self-sacrifice, and self-objectification become the living component of individual-independent systems. They have their basis in a certain religious concept of self and world. The technical transformation of the world and the accumulation of wealth becomes the direct method to struggle for and attain the unfathomable grace of God.

For Marx, on the other hand, the form of consensus that corresponds to the autonomous nature of capitalist exploitation is no longer, or at least not primarily, dependent on precapitalistic and religious traditions. Instead, capitalism itself produces orientation patterns in the form of the labor market that allow an (apparent or relative) individual-independence of industrial firms. Wage labor forces the individuals to develop a double and split relationship to themselves and their abilities. On one hand, they must let their abilities shine in order to charm the purchasers on the labor market into a purchase of labor power, their commodity, at the most favorable possible prices; but on the other, they must become indifferent to the use and effects of their labor power and their work. This coerced and learned indifference prepares and presents the form of consent to arbitrary purposes, of which the other side is the unquestioned power of self-referential systems.

It is necessary to go beyond Marx, however, to explain this. Not just abilities and capabilities are traded and acquired on the labor market but also consent to the shaping of human work processes and thus the material from which individual-independent organizations can be constructed. The labor agreement is also a consent agreement on the pattern of "I, the entrepreneur, pay you and do not care what you do with your money in your leisure time, as long as you do not care what I do and produce with your labor power during the working hours that I pay you for." The labor agreement is a power agreement; it indemnifies the worker, the owner, and seller of labor power for the substance and the utility of work and directs them to leisure time to satisfy or assuage "private" needs, wishes, hopes, and fears. The conversion of labor power is ceded to the purchaser and organizer of the work. The consent to this exchange may be coerced and generated by the wage worker's financial distress, that is, unemployment; on the other hand, the system of hierarchical and fragmented industrial labor desensitizes workers to the substance and effects of their work. In other words, the cultural form of indifference from which self-referential systems are made is produced inside these systems and is inculcated over and over again. A worker in a jam factory need not like jam, in the flippant words of Niklas Luhmann. Power that functions is not perceived.

System formation is power formation in the overall conditions of the self-evident consent and the renewal of the consent according to the laws of supply and demand, hiring and firing, making a living, and performing a role on the job. Self-referential systems thus rely on purchased consent; they are wage dependent or hired organizations. The indifference of workers to the products, or the (ecological) effects and side effects of their work, is the other side of the power that causes individuals to become, or better, appear to become, one environment of the systems among others. To the extent this indifference is canceled (for whatever reasons) and replaced by substantive demands on labor, power begins to become questionable and to disintegrate. Management can no longer count on automatic consent. Instead, it is always compelled to generate consent in making its decisions. Of course, management can still transfer, discharge, and promote employees and all the rest, but where this increases the probability of being unable to "recruit" a blank check of consent is where power begins to deteriorate.

Below the surface of the labor contract a kind of balance of formal and informal power elements is coming into existence, and this balance is shifting toward the informal side as indifference diminishes and dependence on consent increases. The power of demands on the quality of work is usually not aware of itself because it is not presented strategically, but individually, individualized, infatuated, one could say, with the demands themselves. The still impotent power of labor power suppliers as they become more substantively demanding is becoming evident to the opposing side, the purchasers of labor, as a deterioration of power or a power vacuum, and is the object of all sorts of exorcism activities: business ethics, corporate culture, or corporate identity.

In a work-based society where everyone is contractually compelled to expend his or her own labor force to make a living, the systemic structure of power originates in and renews itself along with professional qualification, orientation, practice, and identity. One can say that orientation to jobs and making a living on one hand and relative system autonomy on the other are two sides of the same coin. To the extent, however, that the compulsion to work for a living is loosened by social protection, labor laws, higher education, two-earner families, and so on, the

autonomy and the autonomous space for action allotted to self-referential systems disintegrate along with the indifference of employees.

Everything that extends into modernity and is favored or compelled by it makes institutions more dependent on consent. This begins with universal suffrage, continues with the expansion of education and the achievements in social and legal protection, and is expressed not least importantly in the increasing dependence of all circumstances and decisions on science. If all of this results in a loosening of the imperative to work and an increased availability of alternatives (for support, work, and identity), then we are involved with a latent democratization of corporate action, or in other terms, with a disintegration or erosion of the power of institutions. Of course, this impotence of the institutions, growing with the uncertainty of a consensus, can itself remain latent so long as no one openly challenges it.

The environmental issue, which has entered and changed the consciousness of people active in companies, once again poses the question of power in companies, because traditional industrial policy has self-destructive effects, not just on the outside world, but also internally, in the company itself. It undermines the unquestioned consent that made the hierarchical autonomy of bureaucratic decision-making organizations possible in the first place.

The question as to what type of consent is at issue can be narrowed down. It is very possible for a high degree of general affirmation of the democratic institutions of the Western social system to go hand in hand with a withdrawal of consent in concrete issues, as the high potential for nonvoters or protest voters in all industrial states clearly shows. Indeed, the consent to the basic principles of democracy and the character of its institutions may even be the basis for the withdrawal of consent in a concrete case. If one had inquired into the general agreement with socialism in the former GDR, the results would probably not have been too alarming to the regime, even though the general withdrawal of consent a few months later brought down the power system like a house of cards.

The theoretical assertion of self-referential systems must thus be reversed if it is not to lead straightaway to a late modern metaphysics. The systems do not reproduce themselves, but individuals in their indifference generate opportunities for control that appear to be self-referent of systems—temporarily. Whenever consent can no longer simply be bought but is made dependent on insight, foresight, objectives, side effects, fun, thrills, reasons, discussions, recognition, identity, cooperation, and so on, that is, whenever it can be granted conditionally, then system autonomy loses its supporting pillars of consent, and two things happen. System formation becomes recognizable as power formation, and the disintegration of power opens up scope for subpolitical action.

The continuance of an institution is based on its social recognition as a permanent solution to a permanent problem. Agents who must perform institutionalized actions must, therefore, be systematically acquainted with the institutionalized meaning. This may occur in an appropriate education process—training, acquisition of competence, and application of the corresponding capabilities in the work process. On the other hand, a basic consensus is necessary regarding the means and ends with which these solutions can be produced and reproduced. This is precisely what expert knowledge and ability accomplishes.

If the stability of autonomous systems, institutions, and organizations is thus fundamentally based on the constancy and consistency of expert rationality, then this condition can also be reversed. Power becomes at risk in institutions when rival

expert groups become independent of one another, compete substantively, and confront one another. "The collision of alternative symbolic semantic worlds automatically raises the issue of which of the competing definitions of reality will be the one society 'sticks with'. . . . Which one will win depends on the power, not the theoretical genius of its legitimators" (Berger & Luckmann, 1969, p. 116).

An essential role is certainly also played here by the question of the extent to which the emerging alternatives are conditioned randomly, morally, or systematically; that is, in the further development of the objective rationality of the expert group itself. In other words, if the professions—the discoverers, protectors, and creators of the new (new knowledge, diseases, medicines, and so on)—split up and create antagonistic opposing truths and realities, then that is exactly the extent to which the fictions or constructions of systems independent of individuals shatter.

So far this has been, or seemed to be, unthinkable, or at least not a concrete threat. Three conditions have changed this: the transition from simple to reflexive scientization, the environmental issue, and the entry of feminist orientations and expectations into the various professions and fields of occupational activity.

Where the sciences and expert disciplines take up and examine their foundations, consequences, and errors in reciprocal relationships, the same thing happens to expert rationality as happened to lay rationality in the triumph of science; its defects become recognizable, questionable, and capable of arrangement and rearrangement. The environmental issue penetrates into all occupational fields and becomes concrete and manifests in substantive controversies regarding methods, orientations, calculation procedures, objectives, standards, plans, routines, and so on. In any case, the existence of ecological cleavages in occupational and expert groups is becoming an essential indicator and gauge of the stability with which the institutions of classical industrial society continue to be able to deceive themselves and others on the doubts of their power. The same goes in a somewhat different manner for the feminist critique of scholarly disciplines and professions. Whenever it is not satisfied with merely attacking the professional exclusion of woman, it criticizes the core, the professionally monopolized rationality and practice, and redefines and conceives of specialist competence with interprofessional acumen and methodology, not just individually, but organized in a coalition.

This is how an ideal is ruined. Experts are able—or so it is generally supposed—to solve differences of opinion by using their methodology and their scientific-technical standards. If one simply conducts research long enough, then the opposing arguments will fall silent and clarity and unanimity will prevail. The exact opposite could in fact occur. Research that inquires further and with more difficulty, even into its own preconditions, taking up and espousing all the objections to itself, would break up its own claims to nonambiguity and monopoly; simultaneously, it heightens both the need to justify things and the uncertainty of all arguments.

The self-referentiality of subsystems in industrial society does not depend only on these subsystems themselves but also on the cooperative structures and dependencies between the subsystems. The industrial agents in firms must rely on a basic conformity to modernization of the accompanying agencies of the administration, law, publicity, municipalities, and citizen organizations. Conflicts are possible, but it must be possible to settle them predictably in the designated arenas and with the designated procedures. This reliability includes the social acceptance of administrative acts and court judgments as well as monitoring administrative agencies that interpret the scope of action in the arena of conflict between opposing values and possible legal interpretations with a fundamental priority for calculable, inherently dynamic modernization.

The intersystemic consensus on modernization is endangered in all these aspects. To clarify this on the example of the environmental issue: The invasion of ecology into the economy opens it to politics. Industry and business become a political undertaking in the sense that the shaping of the enterprise itself—its organizational and personnel policies, range of products and production development, large-scale technical investments, and organizational arrangements—can no longer be accomplished behind closed doors in the guise of objective and system constraints. Instead, all these activities are surrounded by alternatives, which means that other expectations, agents, and considerations, as well as consumer consultation, have an effect on management groups that previously ruled alone and, therefore, "unpolitically." The unpolitical bourgeois of late capitalism as regulated by the welfare state is becoming a political bourgeois, which must "rule" inside its economic sphere according to the standards of politics requiring legitimation. This political bourgeois should not be confused with the *citoyen*, or even an economic *citoyen*. This new type of open industrial politics remains quite distinguishable from the procedures and mechanisms of the political system. The entrepreneur or manager does not become an elected representative; the neutral indicators of wage and profit continue to decide on investments and the success of products and the organization, but the substantive "how" becomes political, controversial, subject to codetermination, and capable of and even requiring consent. Trust becomes central; a trust capital that can be wasted by continuing to act out the old industrial scenario. That is the origin of the "new piety" of business: environmental morality, ethics, and responsibility, proclaimed for publicity in full-page ads and glossy pictures.

Reflexive modernization becomes discursive modernization. The "discursive society" (Jürgen Habermas) is changing the general conditions of economic and technical activity, requiring not just a different "communications style" but also different forms and forums of self-presentation. It also devalues previous organizational and strategic knowledge and requires new intraorganizational forms of action and legitimation.

The politicization that ecological and technological hazards bring to industry has two sides. First, organizational action thereby becomes dependent on publicity and industry on discourse. Second, the opportunities for external groups to exert influence grow, but so do those of the administration and parliamentary/governmental politics. The old unpolitical grand coalition of economic growth between the administration, the state, business, technology, and science is no longer viable. It falls apart under public indictment of the hitherto accepted hazards. Increases in welfare and hazards condition one another. To the extent this reaches (public) awareness, the defenders of security are no longer in the same boat as the planners and producers of economic wealth. The coalition of technology and economy becomes fragile because technology does indeed enhance productivity but simultaneously places legitimacy at risk. The legal order no longer fosters peace because, along with the hazards, it sanctions and legitimates general disadvantage.

In other words, the powerlessness of official politics against the industrial bloc is powerlessness against the classical setting. It can be overcome in a politics of politics that advances and develops its opportunities in forging ecological alliances. In its dual function as consumer and conscience, the public becomes the father confessor for a sinful business sector. Things that had thus far existed only on paper and had not been taken seriously by anyone—monitoring, safety, or protection of citizens and the environment from the destructive consequences of economic growth—suddenly become levers with which the state, the public, citizens' groups,

and the administration can plan and execute their intervention in the strongholds of business and in the name of a new ecological crusade.

Losers generate winners. As industry loses its ecological innocence, other business sectors build up their "greening" livelihood. An economy that becomes capable of learning ecological lessons will split. This split in turn makes it possible to learn by political means. Just as popes and emperors played one petty prince against another (and vice versa), the distribution of winners and losers opens up a political game involving sectors of industry, companies, taxes, and monitoring, spiced up and prepared with "scientific risk analyses" that pass the buck back and forth or conceal it. This "game," which originates along with politics itself, makes it possible to forge coalitions of pro and contra and to play them against one another in order to repoliticize politics. In other words, it is possible to give tutoring to an environmental policy in the form of—to put it ironically—a pocket handbook of ecological Machiavellianism. This removes the air of something technical and naive from the slogan of an "ecological renovation of industrial society" and equips it with political significance and a power to act that are becoming necessary in the transition from ecological morality to an ecological politics.

It is easy to object that these are all just speculations that are being pushed aside by the hard imperatives of free-market success. These are, many would say, fleeting opinions after all, affirmations that can be taken away and given back again, but whose flags are mainly blowing in the wind of the economic climate. A good hard recession (no matter how regrettable it may be in detail) combined with mass unemployment attacking the substance and self-confidence of the populace will drive away these specters and bring the principles of classical industrial modernization back in new splendor like the phoenix from the ashes.

This objection may be valid under certain, early conditions of ecological criticism, but it applies less and less when business itself can profit from the successes and hazards it has unleashed. If sectors arise that build their existence and their markets on the recognition and removal of the hazards, then even the centers of economic power are split into orthodox believers and reformists, reformers, environmental Protestants, and ecological converts. If it becomes an established view that ecological solutions, as well as ecological competency and intelligence in all fields of society, are not just in tune with values but also with the market, in the long run perhaps even the world market, then trenches between losers and winners in the ecological competition for (economic) survival open up and deepen. Ecology becomes a hit, a self-seller—at least as cosmetics or packaging. The resistance of half of business and society faces a grand coalition of the alarmed public, ecoprofiteers, and ecocareerists in industry, administration, science, and politics. That means, however, that unthinking consent can no longer be purchased; alternatives open up; cooperation becomes uncertain; and coalitions must be forged, endured, and fought out, which in turn causes further polarization. Precisely this accelerates disintegration of power in the institutions.

In systematic terms, environmental hazards constitute a field of conflict—there are always losers, but there are always winners as well. Polluter interests, victim interests, and helper interests confront one another. As the danger and the general perception of this conflict increase, a highly legitimate interest in preventing and eliminating it grows at the same time. The ecological crisis produces and cultivates a cultural Red Cross consciousness. It transforms everyday trivial, unimportant things into tests of courage in which heroism can be exhibited. Far from intensifying and confirming the general pointlessness of modernity, environmental dangers create a substantive semantic horizon of avoidance, prevention, and helping. This

is a moral climate and milieu that intensifies with the size of the threat, in which the dramatic roles of heroes and villains achieve a new everyday meaning. Sisyphus legends spring up. Even negative fatalism—"nothing works anymore, it's all too late"—is ultimately only a variant of the same idea. This is precisely the background against which the role of Cassandra can become a vocation or a career.

The environmental issue, the perception of the world in the coordinate system of ecological-industrial self-imperilment, turns morality, religion, fundamentalism, hopelessness, tragedy, suicide, and death—always intermingled with the opposite, salvation or help—into a universal drama. In this real-life theater, this continuing drama, this everyday horror comedy, business is free to take on the role of the villain and poisoner, or to slip into the role of the hero and helper and celebrate this publicly. The cultural stages on which the ecological issue is played out modernize archaism. There are dragons and dragon slayers here, odysseys, gods, and demons, except that these are now played, assigned, and refused with shared roles in all spheres of action—in politics, law, the administration, and, not least of all, in business. In the environmental issue, a postmodern, jaded, saturated, meaningless, and fatalistic pâté de foie gras culture creates a Herculean task for itself that acts as a stimulus everywhere and splits business into villains and Robin Hoods.

In systematic terms, one can distinguish two constellations in the ecological conflict following the schema of Volker von Prittwitz (1990). The first constellation is confrontation, where polluter industries and affected groups face off against one another in spectacular fashion. This constellation begins to change only in a second constellation, in which (a) helper interests awaken and (b) the cover-up coalition between polluters and victims begins to crumble. This occurs as parts of business, and also of the professional intelligentsia (engineers, researchers, lawyers, and judges), slip into the role of rescuer and helper; that is, they discover the environmental issue as a construction and expansion of power and markets. This in turn presupposes that industrial society becomes an industrial society with a bad conscience, that it understands and indicts itself as a risk society. Only in that way can helping and coping industries and careers develop themselves and their heroism, which both motivates and skims off profits. This presumes a turning away from mere criticism and a transition to the siege of the status quo by alternatives. The environmental issue must be broken down into other questions: technology, development, production arrangements, product policy, type of nutrition, lifestyles, legal norms, organizational and administrative forms, and so on.

Only a society that awakens from the pessimism of the confrontational constellation and conceives of the environmental issue as a providential gift for the universal self-reformation of a previously fatalistic industrial modernity can exploit the potential of the helping and heroic roles and gain impetus from them, not to conduct cosmetic ecology on a grand scale but to actually assure viability in the future.

On the international level as well, the activation of "guardian angel industries" (the expansion of the waste management sector) is an important explanatory factor for expansive environmental policy:

> The internationalization process of environmental policy can be explained . . . from the effect of the helper, even the perpetrator industries. Countries in which a certain standard of environmental protection has developed are interested in internationalizing this standard. One reason for this is that short-term comparative international price disadvantages versus other countries may arise (perpetrator interest), while on the other hand, if their standards become universal,

> due to the associated qualitative demands (such as demand for technology, spare parts and other services), new opportunities for sales, increasing profits and growing fame may result for them (helper interest). (von Prittwitz, 1991, p. 185)

In other words, the conditions for the deterioration of power that were sketched out above—the end of the East-West conflict, increased self-confidence among workers, substantive alternatives in professional fields of activity, intersystemic coalitions—are activated by the split in the institutions of business, professions, and politics. The mills begin to grind, not contrary to business, but because business also profits from it.

Altogether, this implies that ecology abolishes the quasi-objective apoliticism of the economic sphere. The latter splits up in its sinfulness, all the way to its management, to the personality and the identity of the people on all levels of action. This splitting and susceptibility to division into the sinful and the redeemed permits a "political sale of indulgences" and restores to politics the power instruments of "papal jurisdiction and misjurisdiction," the public exhibition and self-castigation of the great industrial sinners, and even the public torture implements of an "ecological inquisition."

So far, my argument has been mainly theoretical in nature. The recent case of the consumer boycott of Shell in Western Europe can serve to illustrate the way in which the old systems of classification are indeed jeopardized. It also underlines the potential strength of ecological subpolitics. In the summer of 1995, Greenpeace, the latter-day crusader for good causes, succeeded in getting Shell to dispose of one of its obsolete oil rigs on land rather than in the sea. Many voices wondered whether this was not a case where the basic rules of the political game were put in jeopardy. After all, Greenpeace had basically authorized itself to correct the course of legitimate decision making and thus called into question the national sovereignty of the United Kingdom and injured the unwritten rules of diplomatic conduct.

What many seem to fail to appreciate is that it was not Greenpeace that caused the U-turn in Shell policy but the mass consumer boycott by the citizens of several northwestern European countries, which was itself the product of the worldwide televised accusation of Shell's alleged antiecological action. It was not the NGO Greenpeace that threatened the political system; Greenpeace only illuminated the existing vacuum of legitimation and power within the political system.

Time and again ecological subpolitics features coalitions of actors that normally would not be considered to be able to join hands. In the Greenpeace case we saw how Chancellor Kohl as chancellor-citizen in effect supported the subpolitical action of other citizens of various nationalities against his British colleague Prime Minister John Major. Suddenly, everybody seemed to recognize the political moments in everyday life and acted upon them, in particular by refusing to fuel up at Shell gas stations. Quite improbable, really: car drivers united against the oil industry. In the end the legitimate state power is confronted with illegitimate international action and its organizers. By so doing, the means of stately legitimacy precisely brought about the break away from these structures. The extraparliamentary action "injured" the narrow frame of the indirect and hidden yet legitimate decision-making structures and was, in effect, a case of ecological arbitrariness to get around the perceived ecological insensitivity of the existing decision-making structures. In this sense, the anti-Shell coalition brought about a change in the political scenery: the politics of the first, industrial modernity made way for the new politics of the second, reflexive modernity. The nation state governments sat

on the spectator gallery while the unauthorized actors of the second modernity called the tune according to their own rules.

The political novelty is not that David has beaten Goliath, but that David plus Goliath, acting at a global level, have successfully joined together against a world corporation and the legitimate (British) national government and its politics. What is new is the international alliance between extraparliamentary and parliamentary forces, citizens, and governments for a cause that is in the higher sense legitimate: the saving of the world's environment.

Here, it becomes apparent that the well-institutionalized world of the first modernity only appears to be breaking up into individualization. Paradoxically, the challenge of global dangers provides it with a fountain of youth—for a new transnational morality and activism and for new forms (and forums) of protest, but also for new hysterias. Status or class consciousness, belief in progress or decline, the enemy image of communism—all these could be replaced by the humanitywide project of saving the world's environment. Global threats can generate global communities—at least ad hoc ones for the specific historical moment.

Of course, the anti-Shell alliance was morally suspect. In fact, it was based on downright hypocrisy. Kohl, for instance, could use this symbolic action (which cost him nothing) to divert attention from his no-speed-limit policy on German autobahns, which is polluting the air over Europe. German-Green nationalism and know-all attitudes also made themselves felt beneath the surface. Many Germans are governed by the ideal of a kind of green Greater Switzerland for Germany and its environment. They dream of a Germany that will be the world's ecological conscience. Perhaps a second, ecologically motivated round of reparations have appeared from behind the scenes, mixed with a fresh dose of superiority over environmental questions that are anything but environmental—namely, a kind of new religion of secularized, individualized society. One may wonder, for instance, what would happen if Greenpeace International one day called for a boycott of Mercedes and Volkswagen to stop the autobahn speed terror. And what if it enlisted the support of Switzerland, Sweden, Denmark, Austria, and also France, because France, with quite unecological thoughts in mind, hopes to gain advantages in the European car market and would probably be willing even to put up with Greenpeace impudence if it served that purpose? This may all be true. Still, the lessons of politics are different from those of morality. Precisely in the alliance between mutually exclusive beliefs—from Chancellor Kohl to Greenpeace activists, from Porsche fetishists to throwers of incendiary devices—the new quality of the political is beginning to show.

For the business organizations, too, there has been a radical change in the situation. Shell, for example, did everything from its point of view to control the problem. Yet it relied too much on the old coalition of economic growth that functioned so well in the post–World War II era. An agreement had been reached with government experts and managers to go for dumping at sea, and that was the optimal solution for Shell itself. But when they tried to implement it, the exact opposite happened: the markets threatened to collapse. So the lesson for business organizations is that there are no expert solutions in risk discourse, because experts can only supply factual information and are never able to assess which solutions are culturally acceptable.

This too is new: Politics and morality are gaining priority over expert reasoning. Whether such politicization can go beyond single issues to constitute an authoritative environmental politics is quite another matter. Here, probably, are the limits of global subpolitics, which should not be confused with the policy of national

governments. On the other hand, the process of subpoliticization should not at all be considered as irrational, because it has all the marks of a global republican modernity in contrast to the representative, national parliamentary democracy of parties. The activity of world corporations and national governments is becoming subject to the pressure of a world public sphere. In this process, individual-collective participation in global action networks is striking and decisive; citizens are discovering that the act of purchase can be a direct ballot that they can always use in a political way. Through the boycott, an active consumer society thus combines and allies with direct democracy—at a world level.

This comes close, in an exemplary manner, to what Kant outlined exactly 200 years ago in his "Perpetual Peace" essay as the utopia of a cosmopolitan society, as opposed to what he called the "despotism" of representative democracy. It would be a global nexus of responsibility, in which individuals—and not only their organizational representatives—could directly participate in political decisions. In the face of the ecological crisis that is produced by the existing institutions, individuals—both within and outside those institutions—recognize that they will have to take up a political role themselves. This allows us to grasp at once the acute relevance of what is currently discussed in the sociology of science and technology as "technological citizenship"; namely, the recovery of basic democratic rights against the "no man's rule" of technological developments propelled by the existing institutions (Frankenfeld, 1992; Laird, 1993; Zimmerman, 1994).

CONCLUSION

"In my opinion, the history of mankind, its endangerment, and its tragedy, is just beginning today. So far, there have been altars of saints and the signs of archangels behind it. Chalices and baptismal fonts bathed its weaknesses and wounds. Now the series of great insoluble disasters itself is beginning" (Gottfried Benn). The history of nature is coming to an end, but the history of history is just beginning. After the end of nature, history, society, nature, or whatever the great bloated beast may be called, is finally reduced to a history of humanity. Not only has modernity lost the "altars of saints" and the "wings of archangels," the alter ego of nature and the superego of the institutions are both dissolving into decision making. Shining through everywhere in its helplessness is the individual to whom Adorno (1951) referred in defensive melancholy:

> Among the standardized and administered humanity units, the individual continues to exist. It is even under protection and is achieving monopoly value. But in reality it is still the function of its uniqueness, like the deformed fetuses that were once stared at and laughed at by children. Since the individual no longer makes an independent economic living, his character comes into conflict with his objective social role. Precisely because of this contradiction, he is being tended in national parks and enjoyed in laborious contemplation. (p. 251)

The alternative, then, is the rethinking of government and politics so as to create open governments and organizations, tendered by much better informed publics and socially aware firms, all brought face to face with the consequences of their actions from which they are at present largely divorced. Recent cases such as the political turmoil over bovine spongiform encephalopathy in Europe show the extent to which the old methods of risk assessment have inflicted an uncontrolled and uncontrollable experiment upon society. To be sure, risk cannot be banned from

modern life, but what we can and indeed should achieve is the development of new institutional arrangements that can better cope with the risks we are presently facing; not with the idea in mind that we might be able to regain full control, but much more with the idea in mind that we have to find ways to deal democratically with the ambivalences of modern life and decide democratically which risks we want to take.

NOTE

1. The following quotation was translated from German into English.

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