

# Why Ecological Governance Now More Than Ever?

Transcript of a Keynote presentation by R. Michael M'Gonigle

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Why does ecological governance matter now more than ever? As many of you know, the problem is obvious in the sense of environmental crises, or ecological crisis. But the question is the response. What is the *response*? The POLIS Project on Ecological Governance – is, in fact, a response that originated in 2000. It's a response that is rooted in some fairly intense thinking, which is what I am going to speak to today. I'll focus on three key words: **polis**, **governance**, and **ecological** – and how these words encapsulate a way of thinking about a response to the situation that we are facing on this planet.

I'll start with **polis** - the nature of polis. It is an interesting term. It is problematic in all kinds of ways. But at the same time, it has a lot going for it. The idea of polis comes from the Greeks, 2500 years ago. In a way, it is also Western – the Western intellectual tradition of 2.5 millennia really goes back to there – and we are still pulled into the thinking that went on at that time. Of course “the polis” means “the city state”. The city state where people, the Athenians, lived. And it means the idea of a self-governing collective in the city state – which is limited, however both the pro and the con are very illuminating as to where we are today. The Greek city state is very problematic. You had slaves. Women had very little standing. There were a lot of wars going on between these different states. So there are a lot of issues – of where the wealth comes from, where the power comes from, how power was exercised, and how relationships with other parts of the world were maintained. But at the same time, there was also this idea of a collective self-government – of people, of the beginning or roots of democracy, of people actually living together and collectively saying “we are going to govern ourselves, together”, albeit with major exclusions. Nonetheless, that early notion of collectively making decisions where we live and about where we live is important.

The idea of polis is based on the idea of nature. But a different conception of nature than we think of as nature in the physical world – a conception of natural law. What is it that we as humans share? Who are we as humans, in this world? And how do we as humans, decide collectively what we do? This is a huge question. It's ongoing, and it will be a perplexing question forever. In the polis, the argument was that one of the things about the human was that the human was a social animal. The human was a reasoning animal that collectively worked through dialogue, through living together, to decide how one would live, how we would live as a community. The highest ideal of being human in the polis was the political life, the life of collective reflection and action in the polis.

Enter the idea of natural law, the laws of nature. Not the physical laws of nature only, but the laws embedded in the natural world. Embedded in a world that's larger than humans. How do we relate to that, and how does it tell us who we are?

One of the ideals of the polis is that it keeps these questions front and centre. We never stop asking them – who are we? How are we in relation to the larger world? This way of thinking has disappeared today. We don't ask those questions anymore. We just assume that we are all individuals, doing our own thing in the world, making money – and the state is there and everything is sort of naturalized. We take this for granted. We don't really take the issue of "who we are in relation to the larger world" as a central issue of our life together. But that is what polis wants you to resurrect, to revitalize. This idea of being in accord with nature that was put forward in the polis was a revolutionary concept at the time. It was a challenge to traditional authority to say that you – these authorities that we have inherited – have to be accountable. You have to be accountable to something outside of yourself. Something bigger than you are. And we have to talk about that. So how do we have a dialogue, and how do we have authorities and power structures in dialogue today, continuously, about who we are?

Now, the polis, I would argue in ancient Greece, was quite anti-natural in the physical sense. It was the city state that put the outside world at a distance. And in its own thinking, it really privileged rationality. The rationality in a man. The rationality of making collective decisions as a social animal – less so the body, less so the physical world. But again that's a very important tension to continue to have back and forth. How do we make decisions? Is it just reason? Is it just a bunch of individuals running around casting ballots or buying goods? Or is it something bigger than that? Is it us as physical beings living in a physical world? In other words, thinking about one's relationships, one's senses – not just one's mind. I would argue that that is a major Western inheritance. This inheritance of a government, collective government through rationality, that we are reasoning individuals, which goes all the way down. All the way down from the land and still underpins us, which is why you look at any jurisprudence text or political theory or right back to the Greeks. It is very much a part of who we are.

So that is the first word, *the polis* – as an entity, as an historical phenomenon, as a way of thinking, as a way of relating to each other as a community, relating to things we put aside whether it's where the wealth comes from, who really has power inside the polis, our relationship to the natural world. All that continues to resonate through us today. Thus, the POLIS Project on Ecological Governance – a project that wants to engage with that dialogue and that way of making our future, our lives.

Next is **governance**. Leaving ecological out of it for the moment, let's look at the POLIS Project on Governance. Let's look at the word governance. There are many related words – government, the state, governmentality (a much more sophisticated and subtle word referring to not just the government up there making decisions). The government has pervaded all aspects of our lives, whether it's getting a driver's license or going to the health clinic, there are all kinds of government pieces that shape who we are. The word governance was a big word in the 1990s around this, i.e., not just government making decisions – it's corporations, it's civil society, it's non-governmental organizations, it's different groups, it's indigenous peoples. So we mean the governance of groups, government according to a range of groups. There is no

secret word here. When I use the word governance, and when we use the word governance to refer to the POLIS Project, we mean looking outside the normal ways of just thinking about governments, and trying to think bigger.

And then the lesson of polis comes back again. How do we structure governance systems so that we are accountable to the world? How do we structure the institutions that we create so they can fulfill the nature of the world? If a human is defined in one way, what does it take in our structures to allow the human to flourish? Or the rest of the world – other peoples, other forms of life, whether it's fish or the forests or the air – how do we structure our governance systems to allow these to flourish and how do we reflect on that as a community? If our institutions don't do that, if our institutions and government structures don't fit with that flourishing, that's bad. That's unjust. That's wrong and we have to change it. If we repress what allows us to flourish, that's a problem. So what this means – *polis* and *governance* – is that our forms of governance, not just our laws, but our whole forms of governance have to be accountable. They have to be accountable to larger values that are bigger than we are, that are embedded in the world, imminent in the world, and we have to be able to talk about those.

Let me give you an example. I teach environmental law in the Law School. I have been developing work with Louise Takeda on what I call [Green Legal Theory](#). I won't elaborate in detail but the premise of it is quite simple: People pass environmental laws. We have environmental laws. Our environment is a mess, but we have these environmental laws. Well who do we ask or to whom do we appeal to pass good environmental laws? To the state, to the government. And who is the biggest developer around? The state. Whether it's the tar sands or international trade agreements or the repression of indigenous peoples – it's the state. So environmental law, our environmental laws are asking the problem to give us the solution. *That is a problem.* That's a problem that has to take us outside environmental law and into governance, into understanding that we can only achieve so much unless we ask bigger questions. This requires a community of thought and citizenship that allows us to ask those questions. So when you talk about governance and you put it together with polis, it opens up a much larger conversation.

So it's not just about laws – legal laws. It's about big laws. It's about the big things that control us – whether that's the needs of governments or the needs of corporations. It's about the culture that we have developed. So *polis* and *governance* ask us to take a broader perspective on what rules us and our worlds, our physical worlds. Not just legal laws, but institutions – economic, political, and cultural institutions and the “logics” of those institutions. What is there about the city or the state or a consumer culture internal to the institutions and their “logics” that drive us? Those are the real rules. So the governance has to address those.

And then looking back from that, how in turn does asking those questions and addressing those issues help to constitute *us*, who we are? Why are we a consumer society, a consumer culture? Is that a natural thing or is that a created thing? Is that created by institutions that we don't ask about? If we do start to ask about those, we get into this circle. We create the institutions that we live in the ways that in turn create who we are. And so there's no starting and stopping point. We create what creates us. So that's the linkage of polis and governance.

Now **Ecological**. That's a special word, ecological. It's not environmental. Environmental to me is a rather static word. The environment – I don't really know what the environment is – this is the environment here, that's the environment there – it's not enough of a "life" word in the way ecological is. Eco-logic. Eco is about relationships. It's about us – human relationships with the physical world, and it's about relationships *within* the physical world - ecosystems. It's about systems. It's not about the humans as just thinking animals, as the ancient Greeks might say (albeit oversimplified). It's about the humans as relational peoples, relational beings who relate to ecosystems. And it's the dynamics of those relationships, the logic. The eco-logic. It's not about trees; trees on their own do not exist apart from the forest – or at least they shouldn't. The forest should be there for the trees. Humans don't exist as just rational beings. We eat food. We organize productions of food. We work with and in and through and use forests. We have cities that work in relation to the world. We have networks. There's these logics of relationships.

So ecological is not just environmental in the sense of a physical environment, it's about relationships that constitute the world, and how we, again polis, how we think about and understand our relationships and structure our institutions that, in turn, have relationships with the rest of the world – and around and around we go.

We construct these relationships, but according to what standards? How do we think about ecosystems? How do we think about human social relationships? What are the truths that ground our relationships? What are the processes? What are the standards? How do we think about our governance systems and how do we understand those? I think last fall the Occupy Movement was the perfect example of that. In cities around the world, people took over a space and occupied it. I love the word "occupy" – at the beginning people just said they are occupying that particular piece of real estate but it's taken on a much different ambience or feeling of "let's occupy our minds". How do we re-occupy? How do we occupy the space of our minds? The things that we've constructed – the cities, the financial mechanisms, our relationships to the world and the one percents? How do we have a world where the one percent has so much power? How have we allowed that to happen? Is that ecological governance? Is that a polis where there's that disparity of power?

So when you look at **governance** and **ecological** together, the Occupy Movement is a perfect example. And then again, you go back to the question of who are we accountable to? What are we accountable to? It's not simply that we as social animals construct whatever we create. It's that we have to map it on to the world. We have to map it on to the world in ways that allow the world to flourish. So the logics we create in governance and how they shape us back is what I think ecological is about.

Let me give you some specific examples. The state – where does it come from? It's so important in how it's colonized this part of the world and the peoples who have long lived here and continue to struggle for a space on this land. The state as this form of governance grew by displacing the peoples, the communities, and the communal organizations that were there before – whether native people in North America or the small scale social organizations in the Middle Ages in England, Europe and all over.

The notion of community-based governance exactly relates to this, and the nature of our relations to the states – whether it's Warren Magnusson's work on cities or Kara Shaw's work on sovereignty and the state – so many of these constructions of the state infuse our work. The state is the biggest developer around and there are a lot of constraints placed upon us by accepting that, by having that as the context for life. Where did it come from? What sort of logics does it have in it? Is that how we as a polis should think about how we govern ourselves? That's one big question.

Another big question is about the rationalities involved, the ways we think. The POLIS Project on Ecological Governance is really about the way we think – the source of Westernism if you want, back to the polis of 2500 years ago and seeing us human beings, as reasoning people, as reasoning animals, and privileging of the role of reason. There was a wonderful talk here recently by a professor from Columbia, Akeel Bilgrami. He talked about how 400-500 years ago, in the early period of the Enlightenment, aspects of the Anglican church in London, England, together with the Royal Society, really worked hard to instil a sense of the rationality, the reason, the idea that science is the core of society. He almost made it sound like a conspiracy theory – that the centre of the world is rationality and how we reason. And those groups who didn't buy into that – whether peasants on the land, communal land owners in England or Indigenous people in the overseas colonies – had no standing.

Bilgrami speaks very interestingly about what are the effects of that? One of the effects of this focus on rationality is to disenchant the world – the world has no magic left, the spirit of the world is taken away and instead it becomes resources. It becomes ripe for colonization, and the only way in which we can colonize is to de-spiritualize the world, and the way to de-spiritualize the world is to say what matters is reason. His argument is that the world then loses value. We don't go to the physical world in search of value anymore. In fact, I would think that maybe as a culture, the Western world has no clue as to what that means. What does it mean to put reason aside and to go to the physical world to learn?

The privileging of reason is a very male phenomenon. I don't think it is quite a conspiracy, it's just power – a bunch of powerful people in England in the 1500s and 1600s arguing against this enchanted world, which really gave rise to, for example, the College of Physicians and Surgeons. So medicine becomes the privilege of male doctors and a centralized power structure that says the world and your bodies are science, and all you witches out there who did these herbal medicines, and native people with shamans and Indian doctors will not be allowed anymore. The point of Bilgrami's talk was that this motivated Gandhi – that Gandhi was responding and reacting against the disenchantment in England in the 1600s, he was reacting against this colonization of very different ways of living on the world. So that's another example.

More immediate are the forms of governance where we distance the world, where we push the world away. I often think about how we are very concerned with food, it's a big theme. Food is a good example. We have science around agribusiness, genetically modified organisms and so on. People say we now get five percent of our food in Canada, in Victoria grown locally, while 95% is imported. What if rather than arguing about the rules of agriculture and agribusiness, what if we said we need 30% of this city to have young people on the land growing food? We would need a different structure of governance, we would be creating a city where people are

working with the land – and our rationality would change. If 30% of the people of our community were small local urban farms scattered throughout the region, and if we had young people able to do that and we treated those people and the land with respect, we would have a different culture, a different way of thinking, a different rationality. So very specific things like food really go back to this idea of governance and how we create institutions by which we govern, and what are the ways we think and how we relate to them. Are we just rationale reasoning people? Or are we people who live on the earth? And how then should we create governance institutions?

POLIS has done a lot of work over the years on what UVic looks like. We've had arguments with a lot of students to have much more live food production on the campus. That would change the campus, it would change the way we think, it would change how we react and relate to each other. So polis links very fundamentally with thinking about the physical spaces we live in and how we construct those.

And how about how we construct ourselves? Our older son sent us a video, a TED Talk. This TED Talk was about ADHD and he was linking the disorder to television, to kids between zero and two years watching TV. Unbelievably dramatic impacts in terms of the ability to focus, to be calm versus really speeding around. *That* is a very POLIS Project on Ecological Governance type of thing – children and the sustainable culture, healthy children. How is it, that we as a collective make decisions or don't make decisions to let that kind of thing happen? There's a well-known book, "Last Child in the Woods" by Richard Louv that talks about this phenomenon as "nature deficit disorder". How is it that we have institutions that allow our own offspring, our own children, our own communities to be constructed in ways that just don't make sense? What do we do about that?

And how then do we respond to governments? I'll end on one specific example, which is a very important element of the POLIS Project on Ecological Governance. It is not just talking about reforms, or making reforms, but making re-forms. Re-formations. Forms creating new forms. There is a long-standing debate about what's called ecosystem management and ecosystem-based management. It offers a great metaphor: the idea of ecosystem management is that you have a bunch of people working in the government who manage the ecosystem. They say "we need forests here, that's the most important thing for us. We're going to try to fit in recreation. We'll worry about water (sort of) and the people (sort of) – but we will manage it according to our values." Compare this with ecosystem-*based* management, which turns this around and says that whatever happens in the ecosystem, must be done in ways that allow that ecosystem to continue to flourish. The management must be based in the ecosystem. For example, Nancy Turner's work on the Clayoquot Scientific Panel is all about this.

So how do we create institutions that sit *within* the ecosystem, that sit and work with that larger system. This takes us all the way back to *polis* - that's the question of the polis. How do we create governance structures, relational structures, that allow the human to map on to the world so that we can all flourish?