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**Political Ecology:
From Autonomous Sphere to Basic Income***

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Abstract – Political ecology can be more than a concern with the environment or a fuzzy doctrine, somewhere between the liberal right and the socialist left. To see this, one needs to deploy the political space so as to make room, next to the market and the state, for what André Gorz proposed to call the “autonomous sphere,” and one needs to understand, as Gorz eventually did, the close connection between political ecology so conceived and the idea of an unconditional basic income.

Keywords – André Gorz, autonomous sphere, basic income, political ecology

Political ecology, we often hear, does not reduce to protecting the environment. But what else does it consist of? Is it more than a collection of mystical ideas or a hodgepodge of disconnected proposals? Twenty years ago, in a text that had, and seems to keep having, some local impact, I answered this question in the

* The present text is an abridged and slightly adapted version of “Post-scriptum: L’écologie politique comme promotion de l’autonomie et comme poursuite de la justice libérale-égalitaire,” *Etopia* 3 (2007); revised and expanded as “De la sphère autonome à l’allocation universelle,” in C. Fourel (ed.) (2009) *André Gorz, un penseur pour le XXIe siècle*. Paris: La Découverte.

affirmative (Van Parijs, 1990). Political ecology can be more than a fuzzy doctrine, somewhere between the liberal right and the socialist left, provided that the political space is deployed so as to make room for André Gorz's "autonomous sphere" and a close connection is made with the idea of an unconditional basic income. The present paper restates, updates and reassesses this answer, and thereby aims to pay a modest tribute to the memory of André Gorz (1923–2007), a great independent thinker and a wonderful personality.

1. The Autonomous Sphere

The political space of industrial society can be depicted as a line drawn from the extreme right of the all-encompassing market to the extreme left of the all-encompassing state. The political space of post-industrial society, by contrast, should be depicted as a triangle whose base is formed by the line just described, and whose third angle corresponds to what would be a fully "autonomous" society. In a post-industrial society, the doctrinal debate is no longer bipolar – between liberals and socialists – but *tripolar* – with the addition of ecologists, whose specific characteristic is that they promote the autonomous sphere against the influence of both the market and the state.

So at least I claimed in my 1990 text, strongly inspired by the work of André Gorz (1978, 1980, 1983, 1985). To reassess this claim two decades later, I must begin with a modicum of conceptual clarification. The expression "autonomous sphere" is here used in a purely subtractive sense, to refer to one category of productive activities broadly conceived, that is, one subset of contributions to the creation of goods and services useful to oneself or to others. This subset comprises all the productive activities whose products are neither sold on the market nor commissioned by a public authority. It is in this sphere that we move, for example, when we mow the lawn or give birth, when we organise a street party or correct a Wikipedia entry, when we look for an inexpensive retirement home for an elderly neighbour or stick up posters in a tube station to advocate basic income, when we corner a vandal in the subway or teach our children how to carve a pumpkin. Thus defined by simple subtraction, it is tautologically true that the autonomous sphere exhausts, along with the market sphere and the state sphere, the whole of productive activity. But one can allow for intermediate activities: public enterprises between the state and the market, subsidized non-profit associations between the state and the autonomous sphere, and maybe cooperatives and so-called local exchange systems (but not the black market) between the autonomous sphere and the market.

Whatever the precise criterion adopted to circumscribe the three spheres, it should be clear that nobody can wish our societies to be driven into one of the three corners of this triangle, i.e., to become entirely market-governed, entirely state-controlled or fully autonomous. And it should be no less clear that nobody can affirm that one of these spheres is intrinsically superior to the other two, in the strong sense that any productive activity that belongs to it is necessarily good, whereas activities that belong to the other two spheres are necessarily bad. Those in favour of more market or more state cannot deny that both the market and the state support dirty jobs and useless work. And the same holds for the autonomous sphere. Nothing immunises it against polluting activities (e.g., mowing one's lawn on a tractor), nor against patriarchal oppression (the family sphere makes up a sizeable portion of the autonomous sphere), nor against inefficiency – there is no lack of associations whose meetings are largely spent going round in circles or making decisions that are never implemented.

What follows from this is that the promotion of the autonomous sphere can unite people driven by very different motivations. Some people view this as a way of making our society more consonant with an ideal of liberty, or of equality or of fraternity. Others – and often the same people – view this above all as a way of revaluing activities unjustly devalued by the glorification of the wage system, or even as a subtle way of increasing economic efficiency. And others again are driven simply by their own interest, by the belief that the measures required to promote the autonomous sphere would have the effect of facilitating their lifestyle or improving their business. None of the above is problematic or exceptional. This is no less the case with political movements that are defined by the promotion of the market or the promotion of the state.

2. The Autonomous Sphere and Sustainable Development

Even trickier for the doctrinal consistency of political ecology is the connection that must be established between the promotion of the autonomous sphere and the “green” themes of environmental protection and resource preservation. In my 1990 text, I had criticized the idea that the limits encountered by “growth,” i.e., the increase in the product of state and market spheres, would inescapably lead to an increase in the relative part played by the autonomous sphere in our productive activity. And I suggested an alternative – and somewhat demystifying – cognitive-dissonance-based interpretation of the alliance between autonomy and the environment.

It is not, in fact, surprising that a movement that highlights the limits of growth should more than proportionally attract people who attach relatively little importance to consumption and relatively great importance to a non-lucrative use of their time. It is these people who have the least to lose from the measures needed to cope with the physical limits of the earth and who are, therefore, the least reluctant to accept the inconvenient truths that have accumulated since Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) and 10 years later, the Club of Rome's *Limits to Growth* (Meadows et al., 1972). According to this interpretation, there is therefore hardly a substantive relation between the measures that foster the autonomous sphere and those required by environmental constraints. The reason why both types of measure are defended by the same movement is simply that the people whose interests are served by the adoption of the former tend to be people whose interests are comparatively less bothered by having to face truths that are inconvenient for everyone.

However, I am now prepared to concede that there is a more profound link than the one I have sketched above between the two components of the ecological project. Urgent measures must be taken to ensure that both we and generations to come avoid a painful collision with the physical limits to growth. Investment, technological innovation and managing the demographic transition are all part of the comprehensive strategy we need. But a reduction in the time spent on the heteronomous sphere (market or state) and a correlative increase in the size of the autonomous sphere can also play a role, at least as long as one can suppose that, on average, autonomous activities are less aggressive towards the environment and less depletive of natural resources than state-run or market activities. This is not true by definition (driving one's kids to school in a 4x4 is more polluting than working as a local postman or hairdresser), but it has a good chance of remaining true, on average, for many years to come.

The measures for promoting the autonomous sphere can therefore reasonably be understood to contribute, among other things, to meeting the challenge of our limited resources, i.e., to promoting sustainable development or – in more explicit and rigorous terms – to moving towards a standard of living and way of life that can be sustainably generalized for all. This does not mean that everything that promotes the autonomous sphere promotes ipso facto the realisation of such a sustainably generalisable way of life, or vice versa. But the link between the two objectives is nevertheless far less contingent than what can be explained in terms of cognitive dissonance: not only are those who are most enthusiastic about pursuing the first objective also the least reticent to accept the

measures required by the second, but the measures required by the first objective help achieve the second.

3. The Autonomous Sphere and Basic Income

What, then, are these measures that can promote the preservation or the development of the autonomous sphere? There is a whole range of them. But the most simple, the most systematic and the most egalitarian is, of course, a universal basic income, an income paid unconditionally to each member of society. However it is financed – whether by income tax or by VAT, by social security contributions or by ecotaxes – it amounts to a subsidy of the autonomous sphere funded out of the product of the heteronomous sphere.

In this light, it is easy to understand why, throughout Europe and beyond, the green movement immediately constituted, along with the left liberals, the political family most receptive to the idea of basic income (Vanderborght and Van Parijs, 2005). But in this light, it is also easy to understand why a universal basic income inescapably poses a problem of justice that divides the left, including the green movement. To promote the sphere of autonomous activities, the basic income paid to each person must be unconditional: if it were not, it would constitute a form of wage and its introduction would amount to an absorption into the sphere of paid work – i.e., the heteronomous sphere – of activities that currently fall outside it. But to receive an income without doing something in return – is this not intrinsically unjust?

Alongside the questions of sustainable funding and efficient administration, that of the ethical justification rapidly took centre stage in the increasingly broad debate to which basic income was subjected, in Europe and beyond, from the mid-1980s. To defend a universal basic income in our pluralist societies, it does not suffice to show that it promotes the development of the autonomous sphere, which is obvious, but insufficient. It is also necessary to show that the introduction of a basic income can be justified by a plausible conception of social justice.¹

In a mental universe that gives priority to social justice, the triangle representing the relative importance of the three spheres remains relevant. No democratic political formation today can refrain from appealing to a liberal-egalitarian conception of justice, understood as a conception of justice combining equal respect for the different conceptions of the good life in our pluralist

¹ Many articles published in *Basic Income Studies* contribute to this aspect of the basic income debate, and so do many contributions to the biennial congresses of the Basic Income Earth Network (BIEN).

societies with a concern to equalize opportunities among all. The way in which the doctrines of the various political parties differ from one another is less and less by diverging from each other as regards the basic features of the conception of justice to which they appeal. It is more and more by giving different interpretations to each of these features. For example, are the *opportunities* to be equalized reducible to purchasing power? Does the *all* mean all the inhabitants of a region or of a nation, or rather, all human beings? Does it mean the present generation or all generations to come? Doctrines also differ in their assessment of how efficient the various instruments at our disposal (whether of the market, state or autonomous type) actually are, and they differ, too, in terms of how seriously they strive – without naivety or hypocrisy – towards equal respect and the equalizing of opportunities.

The reason why the green movement can – and must – continue to defend and promote some forms of autonomous activity is therefore not that it has a radically different conception of justice. It is rather because of its own interpretation (possibly more radical and honest than others) of a *left-liberal* or *liberal-egalitarian* conception of justice: a coherent combination of the ideals of tolerance and solidarity, anchored in the liberal and socialist traditions respectively.

4. "Continue!"

By taking me, via basic income, from the advocacy of the autonomous sphere to the formulation of a liberal-egalitarian conception of justice, the trajectory thus sketched seems to have led me away from the thought of André Gorz. But he had also moved on since our initial exchanges. In 1990, I sent him the text of a lecture I had given at Harvard at the invitation of John Rawls and Amartya Sen, and in which I had formulated, for the first time, the key points of my philosophical case for basic income (Van Parijs, 1991). Shortly after, he responded:

I have read "Why Surfers Should Be Fed" and whilst agreeing with the conclusion, I again felt the malaise induced in me by this school of Anglo-Saxon thought, to which other advocates of basic income belong. Why? Because the argumentation remains at the level of a quasi-algebraic logic and justice is not reducible to this. It is also based on a sense of the normative that precedes all possible rationalisation. One can go from the normative to a logical and legal formalisation, but one cannot start from the latter and move in the

opposite direction. In short, for me it lacks the untranslatable *lebensweltlichen Interessen und Zusammenhänge* that enable individuals to feel “at home” in the social space they inhabit. Moreover, *our* problem is that no one feels “at home” anymore in this (non-)society, especially those in the 15-25 age group, and a basic income, by enabling them to surf in Malibu, will not make much difference. It’s one thing to *choose* a life of *surfing* and frugality; it’s another thing not to have any other choice. One could of course argue that with a basic income, everyone would have the choice of varying their lifestyles. But this would require specific policies in addition to a basic income. That said, I find this debate particularly stimulating. (Gorz, personal letter to the author, November 7, 1990)

We continued this debate over the course of several letters, during a couple of visits to his house in Vosnon (Aube) and in our respective publications. At the end of 1996, I sent him *Refonder la Solidarité*, a little book I dedicated to him. His response was not long in arriving:

In reading your work, I remember that almost fourteen years ago, you sent me a long list of questions, each as pertinent as the next, to which I never responded, not even to thank you for having read me so carefully. Perhaps I was not equipped to respond adequately. We met one another afterwards. Both Dorine and I enjoyed moments of great happiness with you and your family. Meanwhile, six months ago, I was won over to basic income [*je me suis rallié à l’allocation universelle*] in the strong unconditional sense as Caillé and Insel put it, a sufficient (as opposed to minimal) social income, for four reasons other than those you give. (Gorz, personal letter to author, January 19, 1997)

The four reasons referred to in the letter are those Gorz developed in the book he had just completed (Gorz, 1997, pp. 140–149):

- An unconditional basic income is “the best lever to redistribute as widely as possible both paid work and unpaid activities.”
- “If one wants basic income to help develop voluntary artistic, cultural, family and mutual aid activities, etc., it must be unconditionally guaranteed to all.”
- “Basic income is best suited to a development that renders the general level of knowledge the chief productive force.”

- “A universal unconditional basic income is what is best adapted to the economy currently taking shape,” in which production distributes “to a decreasing number of working people a decreasing volume of rewards and wages,” because “if we think through its implications, a universal unconditional basic income amounts to the *pooling* of socially produced wealth.”

This socioeconomic argumentation may appear very different from the liberal-egalitarian philosophical argumentation I proposed in “Why Surfers Should Be Fed” and developed in *Real Freedom for All*. But it is strictly complementary. Along with the great classic theorists of the liberal-egalitarian tradition such as Rawls, Dworkin and Sen, I share the fundamental ethical conviction that justice must articulate equal respect for the conceptions of the good life that co-exist in our pluralist societies, and equal concern for the interests of everyone. But this ethical conviction can only be specified into principles, and guide the design of institutions, against the background of a stylised image of our society and in particular of our economy. The reason why I come to conclusions different from those of Rawls, Dworkin or Sen, particularly as regards the justification of basic income, is that the stylised image of socioeconomic reality that I believe must be adopted differs greatly from theirs (see Van Parijs, 2009), and this image is precisely the one that emerges in André Gorz’s fourfold argument.

Combined with our closeness of values, this closeness in our analyses could not but render us fellow soldiers. It was therefore without surprise, but obviously with pleasure and gratitude, that I read at the end of a letter received some months later: “Finally, I have just joined BIEN. Continue!” (Gorz, personal letter to author, October 15, 1997).

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