To what extent is democracy detrimental to the current and future aims of environmental policy and technologies?

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Abstract
The paper is concerned with the fact that democracy, widely recognised as the most ideal form of politics, is detrimental to the current and future aims of environmental technology and policies. It will be argued that the principles behind democracy, in particular the all importance of freedom for the people, whilst providing a suitable platform for other areas of policy, is one of the main reasons why governments are not responding to the very present dangers of environmental degradation. The paper will use America’s environmental failures as a key example. It will then be argued that ‘eco-authoritarianism’, despite the negative connotations associated with this mode of government, could potentially be the ideal system to ensure that appropriate environmental targets and necessary investment is approached with an affirmative and robust policy direction. The paper will point to China and suggest that, despite currently having an appalling environmental record, this country has the political potential to seize the initiative and re-focus its long-term environmental goals. The paper will then take into account the shortcomings of both systems and suggest that, theoretically, the best way to approach questions surrounding the environment is through strengthening systems of global governance as well as accepting the reality that, in order to attain environmental goals, we must accept limitations on our liberties.

Keywords: democracy; liberalism; eco-authoritarianism; environment; China
Introduction

The most testing policy area of the 21st century for governments worldwide will almost certainly be that of environmental sustainability. Although the degradation of the natural world is not having a drastic effect on the current stability of our society, if trends continue in their present direction, we are going to have to accept various political changes that could dramatically alter our habits and practices.

With all the benefits that modern science has brought it is now wholly illogical to attempt to ignore global warming theory and the unsustainable nature of our economically dominated and globalised society. The fact is we are slowly but surely killing our planet. We have for too long been in a state of denial and have lived in the arrogant belief that we can exploit natural resources without consequence. James Lovelock (2006), in his work the Revenge of Gaia, views the Earth as ‘living….a self regulating system made up of a totality of organisms’ that always aims to provide favourable conditions for healthy life (2006: 23). His anthropomorphic view of the world or ‘Gaia’ is a great way of viewing environmental issues, as it simplifies a very complex issue and places it in human terms. His imagery of the delicate balance of the natural world and the high levels of co-operation that are to be found between plants and species puts into perspective how careful we as humans need to be in order to keep Gaia healthy. Unfortunately we are not fulfilling our role as stewards of the natural world.

Our activities, such as deforestation, are responsible for the destruction of the core of our natural world’s mechanisms. The world’s rainforests and forests are designed to maintain levels of carbon dioxide and oxygen in our atmosphere. Thus they are essential for regulating and controlling the air that we breathe as well as supporting animal habitats. Yet we continue to destroy them at such a rate that they could vanish in the space of a 100 years (National Geographic 2012) Half the world’s tropical and temperate forests are now gone. The rate of deforestation in the Tropics continues at about an acre a second, and has for decades (Speth 2008). South America is already annually losing 1.3% of its forest canopy and that rate is set to rise with unprecedented economic successes, driving the appetites of nations hungry to develop (Mayell 2004). Deforestation is also resulting in the loss of numerous different species worldwide, with species loss occurring at a rate 1,000 times higher than it should be (Gore 2005).

The easiest direction to point the blame is generally at the processes that make-up the nature of our anthropocentric society. Coal burning, oil consumption and general fossil fuel
dependency has allowed us to flourish as a species. However it has come at a cost. The concentration of carbon dioxide (CO₂) in Earth's atmosphere is approximately 392 ppm (parts per million) by volume as of 2011. This is the result of an average of 5.47 billion metric tons of Carbon Emissions per country per region (World Resources Institute 2011). If such high levels of consumption continue, then not only will we see a rise in global temperatures of roughly 0.6 degrees Celsius per decade (IPCC 2012) but we will also see the continued melting of the polar ice caps. Sea ice has dropped by 1.5 million km² since 1970 (Gore 2005) resulting in a rise in sea temperatures and levels. One only has to look at pictures from 40 years ago in comparison to current images of Greenland and Mount Kilimanjaro to affirm that ice levels are retreating at a significantly greater rate than normal historical patterns (Gore 2005). Top this up with a drastic surge in storms, typhoons and hurricanes, fuelled by these sea and ice changes and it is readily apparent that our planet is, to put it in human terms, very sick indeed. I believe it is necessary to mention these striking statistics as it supports the bottom line of the argument that will be apparent in the paper: radical change is necessary and it needs to be quick and efficient in order to avoid environmental catastrophe.

Democracy is the political starting point for a great number of nation-states worldwide. It has proven itself to afford the best possible means of ensuring a fair and equal society. Despite its numerous flaws, it has prevailed over all other modes of government as the provider of growth and, to a certain extent, sustainability. Most of the environmental debates in contemporary society are concerned with the effects that phenomena like consumerism or globalisation have on our ecosystem. However, there is little debate surrounding the democratic framework that these procedures are built on. I therefore thought it would be interesting to analyse the bedrock of our political system, taking a further step back and enquire into the legitimacy of the unquestioned structures that we have built, upon which to base the creation of conditions favourable for human nature as well as the tried and tested methods that have emerged out of our shared history with other species on the planet (Speth 2008). It is the belief of this essay that our natural world is at a crucial turning point and in order to arrive at an answer to these problems, it is first necessary to reconsider the West’s accepted beliefs, in this case whether democracy is potentially detrimental to our current and future environmental world.
Methodology

The first chapter is concerned with the relationship between democracy and the environment. It is important to note that in the paper, the reference to the term ‘democracy’ should be viewed in the liberal democratic format, one that I believe, based on support from Francis Fukuyama’s (1992) work, is the most relevant expression of democracy in contemporary society. I realise that there is significant debate surrounding how societies express democratic values and had I the allowance for more words, would have developed and drawn further upon these arguments. Democracy is an essential political tool and is vital to a sustainable future. It has proven that it alone can provide security and ensure rights for any given nation. Were this mode of government expressed in its pure, Aristotelian conception of direct democracy, then I very much doubt our environmental problem would exist to such a great extent. As it is, democracy has come to be influenced so heavily by liberalism that the two combined now form the theoretical backbone of the 123 recognised democracies worldwide (UN 2012). The chapter will acknowledge the clear benefits that liberal democracy has provided in raising many nations out of poverty, as well as giving them a solid economic and social structure from which they can pursue the ultimate political goals of equality and fairness. The paper will then suggest that our current global society has become over-developed and over dependent on consumerism and support from financial markets. Citing the US as a key example of the downfalls of the phenomenon of ‘unregulated freedom’, the paper will use the evidence gained to back the call, made by academics like James Speth (2008), to re-consider the effectiveness of neo-liberalism, particularly over liberalism’s lack of potential in moving away from short-term self interest and making drastic decisions that secure our long term future. The chapter will also analyse literature surrounding deliberative democracy and the environment, as it is these works that are currently considered to be the best theoretical propositions for effective change in environmental policy.

Chapter 2 will propose an alternative political system in the form of ‘eco-authoritarianism’. This is defined by Mark Beeson (2010) as a political system that moves away from a naïve view of human nature and calls for policy-makers to have more of a decisive influence on environmental decisions (2010: 276). It is important to note that references to ‘authoritarianism’ should not be viewed as an avocation of past authoritarian regimes or a call for its social and political policies to be included in global and national politics. Although I understand that each area of policy, be it social, environmental or economical, are inextricably
linked, the paper is primarily focused on attempting to bring out a greater security for our natural world, rather than an extended analysis on the moral value of authoritarian methods. The paper will cite China as a good example of a nation that arguably has the potential, through the foundation of Eastern values and a tighter control on the wider public, to bring about swift and necessary change to its environmental direction. The paper will then acknowledge the various drawbacks of ‘top-down’ political procedures as well as citing the great damage that China’s heavy industrialisation has had on our collective ecological future.

Chapter 3 will attempt to draw together the strengths from both modes of government and suggest that environmental policy needs to be channelled through the realms of global governance if we are to stand any chance of changing our unwelcome environmental position. The paper will propose a new institution that puts a great amount of trust in the scientific community and ultimately concludes that we, as individuals, may have to accept constraints on our social and economic freedoms if we are to save our dying planet.

The main limitations I came across in my studies were that some of my data sources like the Global Environmental Facility (GEF) or United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP) websites lacked up-to-date statistics for the latter parts of 2011 and 2012. The data obtained for the case study on China does not come from official governmental sources or from global institutions and therefore can be construed as lacking a certain level of legitimacy. As much of my analysis is based on the modes of governments’ potential rather than their historical success, some justifications, in particular for ‘eco-authoritarianism’, can be construed as lacking the explicit backing of evidence. Had I been allowed more words I would have liked to have extended my study on my proposed institution and given a greater explanation on its possible structure and how it would function.

1. Democracy and the Environment – A Marriage made in heaven or a destructive union?

Democracy, through the development of political capability and the spread of freedom, has cemented its position within global society as ‘the most ideal form of government’ available to any given nation-state. Democracy, whilst arguably impossible to define, is widely considered to be a government by the people, where liberty, equality and fraternity are secured to the greatest possible degree and in which human capacities are developed to the utmost, by means of including free and full discussion of common problems and interests.”
(Pennock 1979). Implicit in this definition is the commitment to ensuring that fairness and equality trump oppression and fear. As a direct product of social development, democracy is aimed at the progression of political culture that is now recognisably being expressed through the phenomena of globalisation that is increasing speeds and volumes of trade, improving technology and opening a whole array of opportunities to all areas of the economy (Beck 2000).

This does not, however, imply that democracy is configured to ignore the needs of the environment, most of which are inextricably linked to the survival of global civilisation. Quan Li and Rafael Reuveny (2006) argue (using empirical data based on Carbon Dioxide emissions, deforestation rates and land degradation) that democratic regimes use the best political system available to secure the future interests of the environment. They argue in favour of a ‘bottom-up’ political structure, where freedom of information flows unreservedly between individuals, promotes a communitarian ethic where awareness is promoted and people are educated in the severity of ecological degradation (Li & Reuveny 2006). Under this system, people have the right to protest, be it through an associated political party or a legal institution, if they believe that those in power are abusing their position and ignoring their obligations to the environment. Governments in turn have a duty to be accountable to their electorate and should attempt to incorporate the wishes of these groups into their political agenda.

This argument is shared by Sharon Witherspoon (1996) who, using data collected from an International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) from 22 democratic nations in 1993, concludes that the mode of government and care for the environment have some reasoned philosophical link that has permeated into the public opinion of democratic societies. She points to the need to nurture beliefs that provide a catalyst for wider participation and encourage individuals to link their behaviour with the cosmopolitan mindset that promotes shared human interests, the most pressing of these being ecological degradation (Witherspoon 1996: 66).

These arguments are coupled with UN statistics surrounding pollution and deforestation, which affirm the fact that democracies have a dramatically superior environmental record over autocracies. Democracies have also been at the heart of establishing almost every global environmental institution such as the UNEP, GEF or the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate
Change (IPCC). Democracy also provides the ideal political conditions for pressure groups like Greenpeace to promote their message to the wider community and ensures that media channels remain open and encourage ecological awareness.

On initial inspection, a critique of democracy is a difficult one. The overwhelming past evidence and the academic support leaves little room for criticism. Indeed to argue against the co-ordination of a decision that has been achieved through legitimate and representative means is illogical. Rejection of public opinion leads to illegitimacy and as history has proven, results in a loss of faith in political institutions and ultimately the collapse of social order. Human civilisation needs a structure on which to build and democracy has emerged, up until the current context of the over-development of society (a claim to be discussed later in the essay), as the most appropriate means of ensuring this.

The observations surrounding the beneficial circumstances that democracy provides for ecology has laid a platform for the deliberative democratic green theory, currently recognised amongst certain academics as the most innovative approach to environmental issues (Baber & Bartlett 2005; Eckersley 2004; Lovbrand & Khan 2010; Smith 2003). The argument presents a general belief that deliberative processes, namely the ideal of legitimate decision making through public reasoning, will increase the legitimacy of collective decisions, increase awareness and transform social attitudes in regards to ecological issues. This will culminate in a state of existence where each individual will have the ability to transcend their self-interested preferences and recognise that they are part of a global society (Lovbrand & Khan 2010).

Building on the works of Jurgen Habermas (1979), who believed that communicative rationality was the only appropriate means of emancipating the individual from the political myth of manipulation, these green theorists (Baber & Bartlett 2005; Eckersley 2004; Lovbrand & Khan 2010; Smith 2003) have a core commitment to the power of public reason. They believe that democratic procedure is not, in its current state, linked with environmental outcomes, as it does not allow for citizens to develop a broadly ecological perspective as governments isolate them from political decision-making. Additionally current democratic institutions do not appropriately include the opinions of the scientific community, who should be seen as the chief source of reason surrounding environmental issues (Baber & Bartlett 2005). They believe that co-ordinating democracy and ‘the authority of science’ will result in
more meaningful opportunities for deliberative processes, where those that engage will be more rationally informed.

Deliberative democracy’s chief premise, therefore, is a commitment to a positive view of human nature where individuals have a desire to be included in the process of ecological decisions. It also attaches high expectations to the cognitive capacity and moral potential of the participant to not only put forward rational and informed views surrounding environmental policy but also to engage in the process of arriving at a collective decision even if the outcome may go against the interests of the natural world. Such a positive view of human nature is always in danger of being open to a level of criticism. Deliberative democracy is marred by its utopian aims and lack of empirical evidence to suggest that involving public reason will have a positive effect on environmental goals. The aim of the ‘naturalisation of green policies’ into social consciousness is one that would take a vast amount of time, a factor that Tim Flannery (2010) and Lovelock (2006) rightly proclaim, we don’t have. This positive outlook is equally at odds with waves of political apathy that riddle even the highest levels of political decision-making, let alone one that is perceived by the general public as not an immediate concern to their well-being. Eckersley responds to this criticism by suggesting that the only way to avoid such a problem is to constitutionally entrench eco-centric attitudes so that the natural world’s ‘rights’ become similar to those of the individual (1992), forcing the issue to become part of everyday governing. However the moral and political implications of perceiving the natural world as akin to human life, whilst probably being highly popular with environmentalists and ‘Gaia’ believers, would be difficult to implement as questions would arise as to who has the legitimate voice to speak ‘on behalf of Mother Nature’ (Lovbrand & Khan 2010).

Deliberative democracy also suggests that every member of the public should have a right to participate, regardless of his or her economic conditioning or class. As environmental concerns transcend national boundaries and are recognised as ‘global issues’, only decisions reached after all 6.8 billion participants had exercised their democratic right to engage in free and unconstrained deliberation could claim to be legitimate. This would of course be wholly unpractical and result in the stagnation of environmental decisions, where constant deliberation would take precedent over necessary action and investment.

However the chief criticism of environmental politics and deliberative democracy does not lie in their intended processes but rather in their perception of the term ‘democracy’. Much like
deliberative democrats’ over-positive beliefs in human nature’s ability to quash self-interest in favour of the natural world, they believe that the core success of democracy lies in communication and consent (Dryzek & List 2003). Whilst these are paramount to any democratic political structure, over-emphasis on the strength of these factors portrays an overtly idealistic perception of modern democracy, one that is not in keeping with the true nature of the democratic form that dominates our global society today, namely that of liberal democracy.

This strand of democracy is seen by many scholars, most notably Francis Fukayama, as the end-point of man’s political development and thus is generally recognised, by Western nation-states and global institutions alike, as the final form of human government (Fukayama 1992). Whilst deliberative democracy is concerned with the ‘bottom-up’ pressures the electorate forces upon government, liberal democracy has a ‘top-down’ political structure where influences generally arise from established centres of power in the state and, most importantly, from the world’s economic and financial forces (Cox 1998). At the heart of liberal democracy lies the importance of freedom of the individual to act as he/she pleases in accordance with the various legal and moral constraints placed upon them by society.

Whilst this has served to produce the best possible conditions for society to flourish, it is the belief of this essay that these social conditions have perpetuated an economic model that tolerates an unjustified amount of freedom based on deregulation and has resulted in the irreversible destruction of the natural world (Speth 2008). This process has been fuelled by the growing dominance of economic globalisation to the extent that liberal democracy is now typified by its desire to promote exponential growth as the surest means of ensuring political stability (Beck 2000). Whilst democracy is not solely focused upon economic and material conditions of society, with social issues such as the maintenance of freedom of speech given an equally important role in political processes, controversy surrounding this mode of government is centred upon the knock-on effects that its economic agenda has on the human and natural world. The most prominent of these controversies surrounds issues of consumerism and the extent to which liberal democracy has unintentionally fuelled the processes of globalisation, seen by many as the greatest threat to environmental security (Khor; 2001; Mol 2001; Speth 2004).
James Speth (2004), in his work *Red Sky at Morning*, appropriately articulates this concern, citing the ten drivers of environmental deterioration that all centered upon the habit of consumption fuelled by globalisation. The most poignant of these drivers is the scale and rate of economic growth that is occurring as a result of drastic increases in global population numbers. He believes that current nation-states are not fully aware of the implications that the vast global changes are having on the environment. The root of this problem lies in the vested interests that those in power obtain from continual support towards the ‘tried and tested’ strengths of a neo-liberal agenda, particularly a strong support from multinational corporations and the oil industry (Speth 2004). The reliance on large companies, for our food, fuel and consumer products means that neo-liberalism can be dictated and manipulated by a handful of powerful individuals that essentially decide the direction of the economy (Shah 2011). Whilst growth in corporations has created numerous jobs and a greater level of financial opportunity it has equally ensured that Western populations have become dependent on consumer goods and fossil fuels.

This initial critique of capitalism, whilst providing an angle for the support of other political modes of government is not completely convincing. Indeed as such, liberal democracy has only served to improve western civilisation, performing adequately in sustaining the environment in lieu of the numerous other social anxieties, most of which are of greater present danger to human civilisation and require a greater level of political attention. In order then to appropriately unpick Speth’s argument and link it to the perceived failings of liberal democracy, it is necessary to give an example of a nation-state that embodies these neo-liberal ideals and despite its vast potential to do so, has failed to combat the current and future needs of the environment. In doing this it will be easier to highlight the finer details of democracies’ failings and provide an opportunity to propose a possible alternative to liberal democracy.

**Case Study: America**

If you were to ask anyone which country they believed embodies the ideals of liberal democracy, the chances are most people would say the United States of America. Since its conception as a nation-state in 1776, it has always maintained itself as the land of freedom and opportunity. The Cold War attempted to expand this concept beyond its own boarders, with America pursuing an aggressive foreign political agenda that sought to export its ideology to every corner of the globe (Scholte 2005). The success of this goal, with 89 nations
declared as open democracies in 2010 (Freedom House 2011), has allowed America to dominate global decision making and ensure that steps are taken to further the spread of democracy and American interests worldwide. It should therefore follow that America would equally be leading the way for environmental sustainability, in order to set an example to the various other liberal democracies they helped to create. The reality, however, is very different.

Consciousness surrounding the environment in America is high. The general public considers protecting the environment of great importance, with 57% arguing it should be given priority over economic growth (Blatt 2005). In fact past and recent governments have largely chosen to ignore the desires of the electorate and continue to pursue a political agenda dictated by free market economics. During the 1970s under the Carter administration, America was considered to be one of the leading voices for environmental change (Speth 2004). It was encouraging environmental awareness and attempting to set long-term targets for its economy. However it has failed to live up to its own targets: despite having a large amount of excess capital that could have been invested in renewable energy technologies or programmes to raise environmental awareness, central government has continued to prioritise other areas of policy such as defence. It is now a very poignant reality that the US is among one of the world’s environmentally reluctant nations (Wagner 2011). The statistic that, despite having 5% of the world’s population, they manage to consume 25% of its energy is very telling (Blatt 2005).

A central reason is due to the fact that, as George Bush ironically put it, ‘America is addicted to oil’. Petroleum is the most widely used energy source in the country, supplying 40% of the nation’s energy. In 2003, the world consumed 77 million barrels of oil per day. Of that amount, the US was responsible for 20 million. (Blatt 2005: 97). The use of oil has become ingrained into the American industrial economy and local and national oil companies obtain a number of benefits from supporting the US economy via federal subsidies. This is coupled with the fact that America will go to great lengths, including military action, to protect its worldwide oil reserves, arguably one of the main driving forces behind their presence in Iraq on both occasions. It thus shows their great reluctance to rely on any other source of energy, with a mere 6% of the nation’s energy coming from renewable sources (Blatt 2005).
Water pollution is also a significant local issue for the US. It was estimated that in 2010, 250 million pounds of toxic waste was discharged into waterways, with companies such as ExxonMobil responsible for 4.2m of this amount (Emmert 2010). The pollution problem has led institutions such as the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to suggest that this is one of the most pressing issues that the central government will face in the coming decade. Although the Clean Water Act was amended in 2009, the move has had little effect, with federal courts doing their best to protect the vested interests of US oil companies. Indeed independent studies have indicated that the Clean Water Act has been violated more than 506,000 times since 2009, by more than 23,000 companies and other facilities (Duhigg 2011).

America’s reluctance to help the environment is most apparent through the attitudes of politicians in the US. Groups such as the Republican Tea Party movement, contain a number of members who firmly reject the scientific evidence for climate change. This has had a trickle down effect to the wider American public, with only 63% of the population believing in climate change and 38% accepting that this change was as a result of human activity (Goldenberg 2011). The main lobbyists for America’s two leading political parties have their vested interests in practices that would be hindered by deepening green practices. President Obama for example received $884,000 from the oil and gas industry during the 2008 election campaign (Open Secrets 2011). The Republican Party is unashamedly attached to oil and gas industries and has constantly attempted to repeal bans on drilling offshore, successfully doing so shortly before they lost power in 2008.

America’s environmental reluctance is also apparent on the global stage. Its decision to reject the Kyoto Protocol in 2001, despite the signatories of 73 other countries, provoked widespread international criticism. Sceptics suggested that this was solely due to the implied costs the treaty would have on US businesses, a perception that was fuelled by Bush’s declaration that ‘we will not do anything that harms our economy, because first things first we are people who live in America’ (Brussels 2001). Although the Obama administration has moved away from this policy of isolation, the nation has yet to suggest that they are fully committed to the global environmental project, with the latest summits at Copenhagen (2010) and Durban (2011), both proving to be a disappointment.
Implications and Conclusions from the Case Study

The main point to take away from the case study is not to do with portraying the US as an enemy of the environment (it has, after all, provided some form of investment to the natural world’s future, with $450 billion spent on research and development in the last ten years), it is more to do with the inescapable patterns of consumption that have become ingrained into the US political, social and cultural fabric. America’s national survival is contingent on continued economic abundance to feed a growing population. Democracy has become reliant on and indeed defined by this cycle, which is fuelled by unadulterated freedom for individuals and corporations alike. Speth is thus able to conclude that our ‘economic and political system does not work when it comes to protecting environmental resources’ (2004: 133). He believes that the amount of faith placed upon privatisation and the free market is unfounded, as they cannot be relied upon to provide the appropriate levels of environmental protection. Lack of regulation has resulted in companies consuming cheap resources and not taking into account the external implications of their actions. These ‘externalities’ are what Speth believes to be the main driver behind pollution (2004). What he means by this is that the producer’s financial costs are different from their external ones. For example, when a company burns coal, its only financial concerns are the labour it uses, capital and the outlay cost of raw materials; the price in the form of ‘dirty air’ is not their concern. Producers and consumers are not given the opportunity to see the damage of such patterns since air pollution is not literally visible to the human eye, nor is it a threat to short-term well-being (Panayotou 1998). Due to the lack of public intervention or government pressure, companies are free to act as they please as there is no downside for them in regards to financial gain if they continue to pollute the air. Imposing stringent regulation on these actions by, for example a tax on dirty air, is avoided as it is against democratic principles to over interfere with company activity and indeed there is nothing to be gained by regulators for favouring the environment (Speth 2004). This ties in with the mention of the US oil addiction in that numerous sources of wealth from within the country depend on these sources of energy and their processes. To interfere with them or attempt to reduce their powers would be to limit the economic capability of the nation and possibly hinder the standard of living of each individual therein.

With the case of America and indeed other consumer-based economies, it can be concluded that too much freedom can, in certain circumstances, become a real barrier to necessary change. It can potentially create social conditions where individuals and institutions become
too comfortable in their habits. For liberal democracy, these habits are an over emphasis of the free-market, continual growth of industries and a fixation on GDP targets. Liberal democracy’s success is contingent on these and, therefore, those in power have no choice but to abide by them, constrained by the short fixed terms they have in office. The desire for actual change has slowly been removed from politics, as governments seek to prioritise stability and to satisfy the wants of the electorate so that they will continue to stay in power for a further term.

The financial crisis was a poignant example of this. It was the first time since the Great Depression that the foundations of the free market were truly shaken, allowing certain groups to question the success and stability of the economic systems we rely upon. An acceptance of certain failures and a move towards change could have provided the much-needed stimulus for environmental investment. As it is, that door has been shut as the government is forced to solve the situation with patchwork policies. Countries have localised themselves even further, reluctant to contribute to global environmental projects when their own economies are in dire need of assistance. The US congressional budget office in the wake of the financial crisis conveyed this direction in fiscal policy. In a report to the IMF, they expressed a need to make significant policy changes in order to keep the Federal Reserve in a stable position (Elmendorf 2010). Whilst it was not explicitly stated, the report suggested that the US government planned to roll back some of their international economic commitments. The UK government is equally guilty of attempting to localise their economy in favour of international commitments. David Cameron’s decision to reject a EU wide treaty in order to maintain the strength of the domestic economy is just one example of policy direction that favours isolation instead of contribution (Grice 2012).

Liberal democracy then, if defined in this way, can be seen as being detrimental to current and future environmental policies and investment, as it is reluctant to adjust its course, even in times of failure, favouring gradual social change that will not unsetle the electorate. It is here that I return to the suggestion that liberal democracy may not be the appropriate format to guide global society in its current period of over-development. The environment is such a unique policy area in that it cannot be solved simply by gradual change that will one day result in success. It requires action and it requires it now. Liberal democratic methods would undoubtedly provide the stimulus for sustainability at some point in the future, but time is of the essence and direct, swift action is needed. The West has had a window of opportunity ever
since the 1980 Report of the Brandt Commission on International Development Issues highlighted the urgent needs of the environment (Speth 2004). Despite the warnings, positive signs for change have been limited. Democracy cannot help but feed growth and sustain development. At a time when our world is considered a ‘concrete jungle’, the habits of consumption need to be curtailed by certain measures otherwise we risk the continuation of urban sprawl and depletion of our ecosystems.

It is, however, difficult to propose an alternative political structure which will ensure environmental protection. For up until now, whilst democracies like America have not fully committed to invest in the environment’s future, other modes of government have proved dramatically worse. The next chapter will attempt to put forward an argument that may provide a viable alternative to democracy.

2. Eco-authoritarianism – A necessary evil or an inherently flawed system?

Whilst not completely discrediting democracy, the previous chapter certainly highlights a number of shortcomings in the reality of the continued pursuit of consumerist tendencies through a culture based on liberalism and individuality. The evidence suggests that there needs to be a higher level of adaptability from modern states and a move away from the pursuit of the values of modernity, however difficult a concept this may be to accept. Despite its clear political shortcomings, is it possible that an authoritarian approach may be the most logical and efficient system to tackle the challenges of the environment?

As stated previously in the introduction, the reference to ‘authoritarianism’ should not be perceived in its traditional expression but rather in a more hybrid and rational sense. The best reference point for this is to be found in Robert Scalapino’s model of ‘soft authoritarianism’. He defines this as controlled political life, where freedom of speech is limited, yet those in power accept ‘the existence of a civil society outside the state’ (Scalapino 1993: 74). It also combines a market-orientated system with a paternalistic social order that persuades rather than coerces (Roy 1994). Scalapino’s model, it should be noted, is centred on defining the nature of Asian political models, such as those used by Singapore and to an extent China, rather than a historical western expression of authoritarianism. Francis Fukuyama, who regarded it as the most serious competitor to liberal democracy, furthered Scalapino’s discussion on soft authoritarianism. He emphasised the cultural relativity of this mode of
government, as a result of its grounding in historical values and regarded it as the primary explanation for Asia’s continued economic dominance. As he put it:

‘The Asian experience has forced people in the West to confront weaknesses in their own societies in a way that none of the other ideological alternatives has. Only Asians have been able to master the modern technological world and create capitalist societies competitive with those of the West - indeed, some would argue, superior in many ways. This alone is enough to suggest that Asia's relative share of global power will increase steadily. But Asia also poses an ideological challenge.’ (Fukuyama 1995: 61)

For Fukuyama, the Asian political grounding in Confucian values of loyalty and obedience to authority combined with historical experience, has allowed soft authoritarianism to build a system that will arguably be considered as a more popular mode of government over democracy in Far Eastern political culture. Whilst Western societies attempt to cultivate their democratic values from an ideological grounding that in turn produces institutions, civil society and culture, Asian models are orientated in a reverse structure, putting primacy on cultural experience and teachings (Fukuyama 1995). The essence of Asian society is therefore not centered on individual rights and freedom but rather on a deeply ingrained moral code and communitarian ethics. The difficulty however, as Fukuyama highlights, is that soft authoritarianism is culturally relative and therefore would be difficult to transfer to western societies as a viable alternative to democracy. However when it comes to environmental issues, there is no reason to suggest that soft authoritarianism cannot be used as a political reference point for policy decisions, even amongst Western governments. For, contained within soft authoritarianism lies transferable principles, the most compelling one being trust and obedience in authoritative bodies to carry out policies for the long-term benefit of the community, rather than the short-term interest of the individual. If democracy is to be considered a failing political system in the context of an over-developed society, then this well articulated form of government does pose an interesting alternative.

This is exactly what Mark Beeson suggests in his argument for the coming of environmental authoritarianism. He acknowledges the fact that individual liberty has led to ‘environmentally destructive behaviour’ (Beeson 2010: 276). Whilst democracy has allowed for a more open
discussion on environmental issues as well as raising awareness, there has been too much trust put on ecological enlightenment through education. For Beeson, this ‘relies too much on an optimistic, naïve view of human nature’ (Beeson 2010: 282), the idea that an attitude of respect, through the emergence of a shared cosmopolitan rhetoric will produce environmental improvement is wide of the mark. As Beeson rightly points out, the ‘sobering reality’ is that as the human population continues to grow, consuming resources on an unprecedented scale, ‘policy-makers will have less and less capacity to intervene to keep damage to the environment from producing serious social disruption’ (Beeson 2010: 283).

Liberal democracy, through the necessities dictated by a capitalist economy has built its survival on the continued exploitation of environmental resources to a point where an attempt to gain control of this practice has become almost impossible. The article, whilst not wholly advocating the Asian political model (indeed Beeson highlights the fact that China is a ruthless exploiter of its own natural environment and sets a poor example for the rest of the continent), is appropriately pessimistic towards the success of liberal democracy. It therefore seems rational to put forward soft authoritarianism as a viable alternative: for it avoids trust in the individual, taking a negative view of human nature and advocates the need for state control, particularly surrounding urgent policy issues like the environment. Whilst it is difficult to accept, it may be the case that ‘good forms of authoritarianism, in which environmentally unsustainable forms of behaviour are simply forbidden, may become not only justifiable, but essential for the survival of humanity’ (Beeson 2010: 289).

It is all very well to put forward the theoretical arguments for the implementation of soft authoritarian rules surrounding the environment, but the practical expression of this form of government has, up until recently, been abysmal in regards to meeting targets and contributing to climate change (Day 2005). However over the last decade, the response from a number of countries, which Western critics would view as authoritarian, has been overwhelmingly positive. Such an opinion is epitomised in projects like Masdar city in the UAE or the draconian environmental-social policies of Singapore. Whilst this has mainly been due to high profit margins in renewable energy investment as well as the vast expendable capital accumulated by such nations, there is scope to suggest that such success has been due to the strengths found within soft authoritarianism. In order for a balanced assessment to be given in the paper, the second case study will be analysing the world’s other ‘superpower’, China.
Case Study 2: China

China’s reputation as a nation that has built its industrial economy around the intense exploitation of raw materials is one that is well deserved. As the world’s leading consumer of coal, it has produced 20 out of the 30 most polluted cities on the planet (World Bank 2007). The economic culture is still very much centred upon growth and forcing local bureaucrats to meet state-set targets (Drosdowski 2006). To argue the case for China’s contribution to environmental regeneration, it is very much based on recent policy initiative, investment in renewable energies and future promises, rather than past statistics.

What China has registered in the last decade, along with other developing countries, is that sustainable development has now become integral to a flourishing economy, alleviating poverty and maintaining social harmony (Cao 2011). The concept of ignoring environmental degradation is simply not an option. As a result the Chinese government implemented a dramatic investment programme into the policy area. As early as 2007, China could boast that 17% of national energy was produced by renewable sources. In 2009, it invested $34.6 billion into clean energy through its ‘Golden Sun’ initiative, the most out of any G20 country and double that of the US (Wang 2009). This is by no means a one-off as China plans to increase this investment to $75-$100 billion each year between now and 2020 (Winston 2010). The purpose of this intense investment is two-fold. Firstly, it is hoped that China is pursuing such measures for the benefit of the global environment. The more likely reasoning though lies in the obvious economic benefits that have emerged in relation to the renewable energy industry. It comes as no surprise then that, as well as the direct funding from the government, Chinese companies are manufacturing 50% of the world’s solar panels and wind turbines (Deutsche Bank Report 2010). This has resulted in an 81% increase in renewable electric power capacity since 2005 (Deutsche Bank Report 2010) and China also accounted for 47% of all wind energy investments globally. On top of that, China led the world in asset financing, with $47.3 billion in private investments directed towards installation of clean energy generating capacities (Pew Environment Group 2010). China also holds a very impressive record in regards to forestation. Over the last two decades China’s forest cover increased from 12% to 18% (LaFleur 2010) in stark contrast to a significant reduction in worldwide forest surface area.

China has also implemented the extreme, but to some extent necessary, measure of curbing population growth. One of the central reasons why the environment continues to degrade is the
significant swelling of the global population. China, however, has been the only nation to implement a ‘one child’ policy per family. Although the moral implications for this are vast, many would argue that without it, the fate of the global environment would be all but sealed. The underlying reason for the continual emphasis on economic growth and infrastructural development is simply because the world is getting more densely populated by the minute. With the global population expected to reach 8 billion by 2025 (USCB 2012) the actions of governments are driven by the need to provide the necessary materials for this increase in numbers. The Chinese government has met such a reality with a brutal yet arguably necessary policy that if looked at from a solely pragmatic viewpoint, is extremely beneficial to the future of their surrounding natural environment.

This has led the cited works to conclude that China is ‘leading the race for a green economy’. An environmental report by Deutsche Bank concluded that China, along with Germany, have ‘developed robust policy frameworks, including clearly defined national targets, strong incentives and integrated plans, which can lead to more green jobs, increased innovation and growth in technology adoption’ (Report 2010). This opinion was backed by Andrew Winston, who affirmed that China is ‘going for gold’ and ‘taking this challenge much more seriously than others…. doing things differently, making longer-term, sustained commitments that are much larger than other developed economies’ (Winston 2010).

**Implications and Conclusions from the Case Study**

The main conclusion to be drawn from the China case study is the speed at which the government has reacted to the obvious possible economic benefits that result from investment in renewable energies and combined them with aggressive policy decisions. To consider China a leader of the green economy race in the 80s and 90s would have been a laughable concept, yet they have managed to transform their dependency on raw materials into an economy that is leading the growth of renewable energy in the space of 10 years, something that arguably took western civilisation a whole century. Whilst the overriding reason for this success is based on the fact that China has the second highest GDP on the planet, there is scope to suggest that their mode of governance has allowed them to harness innovative investments and make drastic decisions that would not be possible in the West. For one of the chief downfalls in a democracy lies in placing power in the individual, one who is motivated by self interest, increasing the liability for poor collective decision making. Examples of this are readily
apparent in the nimbyistic or selfish actions of nation-states, with a continual blocking of investment in renewable technologies, as well as a lack of courage to back nuclear energy. For whilst it would be positive to think that humans are capable of making altruistic decisions, the reality, particularly in the consumer society, is very different. Self-centred politics is all too present in democracies and as the realms of globalisation and liberalisation continues to grow, so too do cultures dependent on satisfying short-term desire. China is by no means immune from these phenomena, but what it does have is the power to control them and ensure that they do not completely infringe on the direction of wider Chinese society that hopefully, now includes the explicit importance of sustainability.

The evidence suggests that, while the Chinese government has the political capacity through limited public scrutiny to destroy its own world to a greater extent than the West, it also has a greater ability to change direction and commit greater sums of investment to the green economy. For locked into the nature of soft authoritarianism, is the capability to evade the present-looking demands of the general public and to look to long-term investment in future generations. There is no requirement for a referendum, the long drawn-out bureaucratic decision making involving cross-party debates or national vetoes; the state simply takes control of the situation and acts in relation to what the nation needs rather than what it desires. Whilst the social connotations for advocating such a position are questionable, in matters relating to the environment action needs to be taken through omission of individual self-interest. The thought of placing such a large amount of trust in politicians to serve solely the interests of the people is a very difficult concept to accept, particularly considering historical behavioral patterns and there is no guarantee that they will pursue environmental goals. Yet given the right balance between recognition of civil society and state authority, it could be the most appropriate model to meet the drastic needs of our global environment.

Is it conceivable then that democracies will soon have to adapt their environmental policies and follow more paternalistic methods of governing in order to have a greater political capability to aggressively invest in ecological products? Certainly there is a public and academic recognition that the West has to do more for its ‘future generations’. Ludvig Beckman is one who asserts the need for democracy to ‘take a step back’ (Beckman 2008: 611). After considering the number of different theoretical avenues open to Western civilisation, he comes to the tentative conclusion that ‘we should not rule out the possibility that constraints on democratic institutions are sometimes justified’ (Beckman 2008: 622).
However does this constraint need to come from embracing soft authoritarianism? There are some limitations of the political system that need to be acknowledged.

The most poignant criticism is the historical failures that the form of government has had in producing trustworthy leaders. Whilst the possibility is there for better eco-governance, the historical track record of associated regimes simply cannot be ignored. One only has to glance at swathes of negative data on pollution levels and the appalling regulation of industrial practices to confirm that a rule-based system premised on governmental authority does not benefit the environment. The theoretical potential has rarely transformed into leaders performing their duties of acting on behalf of the interests of the electorate. Lack of legitimacy and accountability more often than not leads to power hungry, greedy politicians acting out of self-interest and being culpable to corruption. This is still arguably the case with the Chinese government with the recent Bo Xilai fiasco reaffirming that its politics are riddled with corruption at the highest level (Franklin 2012). Soft authoritarianism is too reliant on leadership and whilst it is important to entrust some levels of authority to legitimised politicians, it is equally essential not to isolate the populous from political processes. The old phrase ‘power corrupts, absolute power corrupts absolutely’ is certainly still applicable and discredits the potential for ‘eco-authoritarianism’ to be a viable alternative to liberal democracy.

The new wave of ‘openness’ that China is exhibiting in relation to environmental policies can equally be put down to the influence of Western-style politics that have infiltrated Chinese society as a result of globalisation. It has arguably embraced free market capitalism more than any other nation on the planet and is therefore open to all the criticisms levelled at democracies in Chapter 1. The heavy investments in renewable energy technologies are a direct result of the possible high levels of profitability that companies and the government can derive from green investment. The profit potential is driven by the numerous changes to legislation that are emerging in European nations that force governments to purchase materials for creating wind farms or solar panel fields. China not only has the largest source of labour to produce these products, it also has a considerable amount of iron ore deposits, putting them in an ideal position to be at the forefront of the renewable energy market (Chinese Ministry Report 2010). Globalisation, through democracy, has also encouraged a more ‘open’ society where information can be obtained at the click of a button. China cannot afford to continue its policy of heavy industrialisation indefinitely and the more global pressure that is exerted upon
their actions, the more likely they are to consider what effect their environmental policy direction will have on future generations.

Equally, one cannot ignore the overwhelming amount of negative statistics surrounding Chinese consumption habits, particularly in relation to coal and oil. If America is considered to have an oil problem, then China unquestionably has an oil addiction. Issues such as the Chinese public entering a new phase of automobile purchasing has resulted in the International Energy Agency predicting that China will import $251 billion dollars of oil in 2012, up an astonishing 28% from 2011 (BBC 2012; Dunne 2012). Far from being a nation that is leading the push for a greener future, it appears that the Chinese are upping their commitment to becoming the most powerful economy on the planet. It seems that from the $827.6 billion that the government planned to spend in 2011, only 2.9% of this was allocated to energy conservation and environmental protection (NPC & CPPCC 2011).

Nonetheless, it is important to remember that the praise for Chinese environmental policy in the case study is weighted towards the possibility that China could live up to the signs of potential leadership that they are exhibiting in green investments. Whilst past statistics do not favour some of the claims, future implications of Chinese environmental policy lend a level of coherency to the overall line of reasoning. The argument is also premised upon the structural implications of ‘eco-authoritarianism’ so less attention should be placed on the actualisation of the theoretical positions. Whilst it would be misguided to suggest that soft authoritarianism is the answer to our environmental woes, the chapter has still suggested that there are some aspects of this mode of government that could be embodied into our liberal democratic structures, particularly the all important realisation that beneficial outcomes for the environment may only result from limitations to human freedom. The next chapter will attempt to suggest ways in which channels of global governance could incorporate such a line of argument and produce a political and social structure that uses the best parts of both political systems.

3. A Third Way – A combination of both political systems through supranational channels

The two previous chapters have asserted that there is a need for environmental policy to move away from state-centric, nation-based solutions to global issues. For while both liberal democracy and eco-authoritarianism have their strengths and weaknesses, the glaring reality
from both case studies is that neither can be wholly trusted to ensure a swift change towards a greener planet for future generations.

This realisation is by no means novel. For decades, governments have been co-ordinating each other’s policy direction and technological development through various supranational channels, created with the purpose of attempting to give predominance to the natural world over the self-interest of nation-states. Organisations such as the UNEP and GEF have been used since 1972 and 1991 respectively, to ensure that each nation is given an equal voice in contributing to the global problem of the environment (Kutting 2000). Much like the criticisms levelled at democratic regimes in Chapter 1, it is the belief of this paper that our global environmental institutions have, to a certain extent, failed as a result of their commitment to solving problems within a liberal democratic framework. Whilst it is hard to find a better ideological model on which to base these organisations, the next chapter will attempt to suggest a more practical direction for global institutions to pursue in relation to environmental degradation, using the evidence from Chapter 2 and some of the strengths implied in the eco-authoritarian model.

The chief criticism of environmental policies’ current supranational channels is that they do not have the appropriate levels of authority to force through required legislation and regulations on member states (Low & Gleeson 2001). Political structures in every corner of the globe are centred upon sovereignty of the nation-state and its ability to act as it pleases within the constraints of relations with other countries, human rights agreements and a few commitments to global institutions, such as the United Nations. The state then, much like the criticisms levelled at the freedom of individuals in chapter 1, is ordered towards acts of self-interest with its success being contingent on economic growth and staying in power (Elliot 1998). States are thus obliged to follow political courses that ignore the future needs of our planet and focus instead on the short-term needs of the electorate. Such political pressures have resulted in the breakdown of communication between states over global issues such as the environment. One only has to turn to the drastic breakdown of the Kyoto Protocol, the widespread disappointment of nation-states to reach targets set at the 1992 Rio Earth Summit and the host of negative statistics stated in the introduction, to confirm that environmental governance needs to be ‘re-considered’.
In order to arrive at a proposed logical solution to these downfalls it is necessary to unpick the structural foundations of supranational national channels and propose various alternative theoretical solutions suggested by certain academics. (Achterberg 2001; Beck 2006; Held 1995; Maltais 2008; Okereke 2008). The analysis of the utility of global institutions is usually dependent on how well they are performing in meeting their underlying goals and targets. In the case of the GEF, the aim is to ‘assist in the protection of the global environment and to promote environmental sustainable development’ through the distribution of financial grants to fund various projects in developing countries (GEF 2010). In essence, the facility is designed to encourage, in environmental terms, a higher level of global justice through the redistribution of wealth. The intentions of the GEF are admirable but much like other global mechanisms, they fall foul to what Chukwumerije Okereke (2008) terms as the failure of ‘distributive equity’. The concept is concerned with the underlying institutional structure and power relations and the way in which nations influence how wealth is redistributed. Okereke is clear in affirming that neo-liberalism inescapably favours dominant industrial interests that furthers the pursuit of individual freedom and welfare, which inherently compromises a global environmental ethic. He concludes that if just distribution of environmental equity is to succeed, then global institutions need to rely on a new, ‘creative’ framework that rapidly shifts the balance of power to the global community (Okereke 2008: 183)

Okereke’s study on global justice reaffirms the convictions stated in Chapter 1 that neo-liberalism is inescapably flawed. In order to reach levels of environmental sustainability, we not only need to think about how we treat our planet but equally what opportunity and resources we give lesser economically developed countries in their much greater fight against environmental degradation. Current arguments of ‘drip-feeding’ continents like Africa, in the hope that they will embrace sustainability are too hopeful and assume that each individual has the potential to embrace ‘green’ practices. What there needs to be is a global commitment to distributing economic capital and higher levels of incentives, so that there is less reliance on market systems and more on the effectiveness of obtaining capital through global institutions. In order to achieve this shift there needs to be higher levels of faith in the capability and authority of these global channels, suggesting a need to reform environmental governance towards a more eco-centric ideological framework.

A suitable alternative to Okerke’s ‘distributive equity’ concept, which could be considered over idealistic, is to be found in cosmopolitan conceptions of justice. Ulrich Beck defines
political cosmopolitanism as all human beings belonging to a single community based on shared morality. It is an ideology that acknowledges the ‘otherness’ of different cultures, of other rationalities and of nature and based upon this acknowledgement, seeks to foster a world-view of politics. (Beck 2006). Aaron Maltais, in his essay on global warming and the cosmopolitan political conception of justice, is quick to affirm that current forms of justice should entail a ‘duty to create a new global project to address anthropogenic climate impacts’ (Maltais 2008: 593). For him, traditional liberal thinkers like Nagel or Rawls (much of whose work has shaped the nature of political institutions) are too anthropocentric in their conceptions of justice. A cosmopolitan rather than liberal framework would ‘de-couple’ the demands of justice from state centric models and move towards a global project. Incentives are needed for governments to support supranational channels that avert states from acting on its rational self-interest. Maltais affirms that ‘political duty’, namely a moral and financial commitment to future generations, needs to be ingrained into our global institutions, something that he believes can only come from states relinquishing authority to the will of the proposed ‘international project’ (2008: 597). Maltais’s vision is shared by the likes of Woute Achterberg and David Held who propose the concept of an ‘all or nothing’ package where cosmopolitan law should transcend the framework of liberal democracy (Achterberg 2001: 192). For Held, a movement towards cosmopolitanism requires a new layer of sovereignty in the form of a multi-levelled transnational community, where all policy areas are centralised and democracy is deepened - democracy in this context referring to a global egalitarian structure based on co-operation. (Held 1997: 257).

What these alternate academic propositions all have in common is their call for dynamic and reformative action in environmental policy. In order to pursue a more sustainable future, we have to accept that our global institutions need to play a greater role in worldwide politics. Implicit in this desire is the need to change the ideological structure upon which normative politics is so explicitly based. There is a need, as Robert Durant (2004) suggests, to ‘Re-conceptualise the purpose’ of global governance so that it can be positioned to have an actual effect on environmental policy, instead of being stuck in the bureaucratic role that most environmental institutions find themselves. These theories shift from Okerke’s principle in that they affirm a need for cultural and social hegemony that will occur in changing attitudes influenced by global channels.
A good example of the possibilities of reforming international environmental governance can be found in Richard Tarasofsky’s (2005) proposition of strengthening the UNEP. He believes that the considerable achievements of UNEP, most notably the role it played in the *Global Environmental Outlook* in 2000, suggests that this institution has credibility and can be reformed to play an important role in environmental policy. He suggests that there is a need to establish a global ministerial environmental forum (GMEF) so that there is more discussion and dialogue between member states. The GMEF would have global and regional representatives and would be given a stronger role in providing both policy to governments and advice to multilateral institutions (Tarasofsky 2005). He believes that more authority would emerge from the UNEP if it were given adequate funding. The current budget of $160 million is less than that of many NGO’s and national environmental ministries. If the UNEP was given greater access to the GEF’s finances (which equally needs greater funding), then this could provide a catalyst for the development of greater scientific and technical analysis and more financial independence for these potentially catalytic supranational institutions.

There is scope to suggest that this outcome could be achieved by pursuing Held’s theory of deepening democratic structures by creating what he calls a ‘civic society’. This concept is based around trying to remove certain forms of cultural or national identity and thus forming a global society where everyone considers him or herself to be ‘human’. Such a change in mentality, he believes, would encourage people to participate in pressing global issues of the environment and the fostering of bottom-up schemes based on co-operation and mutual trust. Creating foundations like those proposed in a civic society would give greater levels of legitimacy and power to institutions like Tarasofsky’s proposed idea of the UNEP/GMEF.

Yet much like the criticisms levelled at deliberative democrats in chapter 1, Held’s cosmopolitan concept of a civic society is too idealistic. Such levels of mutual co-operation, as well as the willingness of individuals to sacrifice their identity are unforeseeable. The decentralised concept of having ‘global governance without a global government’ rests on individual’s willingness to participate in such a diluted form of politics. Populations from developed, more educated countries would also find it difficult to accept the fact that their voice was on a par with an individual from a less educated, developing nation. Cosmopolitan democracy is also over-positive in its beliefs surrounding the potential of human nature. The very fact that we find ourselves with such a distressing environmental outlook is largely down to our political representatives’ inability to escape from the fulfillment of short-term interest.
Held’s democratic concept is one that is certainly becoming more of a reality as globalisation continues to encourage the interconnectivity of the world’s population but it is not one that allows for drastic action to be implemented.

Based on these criticisms of cosmopolitan democracy and the necessity of tackling environment problems as swiftly as possible, the ‘re-conceptualising’ of global institutions needs to come from a different source. This is where the relevance of discussing eco-authoritarianism in Chapter 2 is of importance. As is suggested in the China case study, the structural benefits of encouraging paternalistic and direct politics, both of which are integral to eco-authoritarianism, can provide the catalyst for swift and pragmatic action: decisions that do not necessarily have to be sanctioned by the wider public or influenced by corporate and national self-interest.

It can thus be proposed that supranational channels need to take some form of direct action, even if this could be construed as moving away from the structural comforts of pure liberalism, and attempting to hold some level of authority in relation to environmental mitigation. For this to be possible, there needs to be a multilateral agreement amongst member nations that recognises that they alone have the power to pass authority onto global institutions. They need to acknowledge that they cannot truly change the natural world’s prospects if they cannot move away from the fiscal pre-determents of policy. There also needs to be recognition from the general public that certain constraints on their current freedoms, if necessary for the improvement of our shared eco-system, should be enforced. If such a maxim is recognised, then there is the potential for nation-state sovereignty to be fully relinquished and a fresh source of global governance to be created to take on the newly established sources of authority and to direct environmental policy and technologies towards benefiting the health of the planet.

Propositions and Conclusions

Thus far, the content of the paper has been almost solely focused on theoretical debate. In order to back up the suggestions made in all three chapters, it is necessary to propose a practical alternative to a re-consideration of environmental governance. The suggestion is that member states of the UN need to create a new supranational institution, one that should be much like that of Tarasofsky’s reformed UNEP. It should also incorporate deliberate democratic belief in placing authority in science (Baber & Bartlett 2005). However the
institution should be ‘newly created’ and separate, so that its foundations are not fully linked to the UN, giving it a chance to be able to escape the bureaucratic pressures and various other inherent faults that current supranational institutions possess. The new institution would avoid such similar downfalls by centring itself upon the scientific community. Let us hypothetically call the new institution the Global Environmental Scientific Project (GESP). Representatives would be made up of regional and global scientists and academics who have no attachment to governments or global corporations. Specialised politicians, who have no strong connections to national politics and are from the scientific community themselves, would then represent these regional advisors. Whilst it would be difficult to place such a high level of trust in the scientific community to make decisions, without the legitimacy of being directly elected by the public, radical choices need to be made soon and if there is any group of individuals that are most appropriately informed to make these decisions, it is those that are most closely connected to the subject. The GESP would be based on a democratic model of governance in that its ultimate aim would be equal ecological surroundings for every individual on earth. The role of the re-distribution of eco-capital also lends itself to similar egalitarian endeavors. Yet it would also incorporate ‘eco-authoritarian’ means of achieving these ends through centralised authority and legitimacy to act on their own knowledge rather than the will of people.

I believe that ‘scientific paternalism’ (as I have coined it), if approached in the right way, would have a greater chance of avoiding corruption and yielding to the various pressures placed upon current politicians. All that they would need is the appropriate authority from nation-states to pursue environmental avenues within a global context. Funding would be of vital importance to the new GESP. If philanthropists and charities were to be convinced that channelling finances through the proposed mechanism was beneficial, then this could be a key source of support. Another (albeit slightly idealistic) proposition would be to try and persuade each member-state of the UN to commit 5% of their estimated annual defence budget to the project for a five-year period. If such a proposition was agreed to by important countries such as China and the US, then the financial position of the GESP would be ideally placed to have the best possible chance of making fast, decisive policy decisions, as well as improving scope to invest on a global scale, in the right forms of technology. The amount proposed is not unreasonable if a unilateral agreement can be reached and would not over-expose nations to other external threats such as terrorism. Let us hypothetically suggest that all G20 nations sign
up to the multilateral agreement. If they were to relinquish capital from their defence budgets then the pool of wealth available to the GESP would be $61.53 billion per annum (SIPRI 2011). Such a large pool of financial capital would place the GESP in an ideal position to distribute wealth to developing nations who state that they are willing to make the necessary sacrifices to ensure environmental stability. The level of power that the GESP could derive from the funds would mean that they could provide high levels of incentives for nations to catalyse a mass movement away from ‘dirty’ energy reliance and start deriving value from renewable energy sources and good industrial practices. The money could also ensure that numerous regional eco-projects that are underway but have suffered from funding issues as a result of the financial crisis, could be completed and sustained. Examples range from large-scale ventures in developed nations like the Gold Coast desalination plant in Australia, to regionally tailored plans like the provision of solar panels for Nigeria’s renewable energy policy drive (Abbey 2010). The list is endless and well-organised, higher levels of global backing could prove to be essential for their maintenance, as well as encouraging other nations to embark on similar schemes.

I realise that such a model is highly idealistic and dependent on the unlikely maxim of nation-states relinquishing their authority, but it is a proposition that could use the powerful potential of making important decisions that could ultimately bring about a greater level of global democracy.

Is it therefore possible to conclude that democracy is indeed detrimental to the current and future aims of environmental policy and technologies? The resounding answer is ‘no’ as the alternative options proposed in the paper do not offer viable and comprehensive methods of being able to direct policy in ways that democracy is unable. What can be acknowledged though is that as our planet becomes more over-crowded, over-developed and over-dependent on financial instruments, so too does the window of opportunity to secure a sustainable planet for future generations. Tim Flannery is right in asserting that ‘our fate is in our own hands’ and whilst the need to be optimistic and to put faith in the ability of our future as stewards of the Earth is important, one cannot ignore our inclination as a species to behave in a selfish manner. Not only is it a political and cultural reality, it is also a biological one (Flannery 2010). Our instinct to survive will not go away. Unfortunately, that survival has become so contingent on the systematic exploitation of our natural world. It has, I believe, reached a point where something needs to be done. Progressive politics through raising awareness and
encouraging good practices is vital for the survival of our planet. We cannot, however, wait for people to slowly adjust their lifestyles and hope that environmental consciousness ‘just happens’. I believe some level of intervention is required, a higher one that is currently present in our domestic and global politics. We need to accept, at some point, that limitations on our economic and social freedoms may be necessary in order to ensure that ‘Gaia’s’ future is secured. As I have suggested in Chapter 3, this has to be a two-tiered process. Firstly individuals have to accept limitations on their freedom. This has to be acknowledged by national governments that, in turn, would make the same sacrifice and relinquish certain aspects of their authoritative freedoms to supranational institutions. This process would require high levels of trust in global governance models that have, as such, been fairly ineffective in influencing the actions of powerful nations. However, we must not lose faith in these processes and retreat to policies of economic isolation and suspicion. James Lovelock is correct in affirming that our planet is old and frail. It is up to those in power to ensure that it does not wither away.

References


