

# The Politics of Ecological Restoration

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Discussion of ecological restoration in environmental ethics has tended to center on issues about the nature and character of the values that may or may not be produced by restored landscapes. In this paper we shift the philosophical discussion to another set of issues: the social and political context in which restorations are performed. We offer first an evaluation of the political issues in the practice of restoration in general and second an assessment of the political context into which restoration is moving. The former focuses on the inherent participatory capacity at the heart of restoration: the latter is concerned with the commodified use (primarily in the United States) and nationalized use (primarily in Canada) to which restoration is being put. By means of a comparative examination of these two areas of inquiry, we provide a foundation for a critical assessment of the politics of restoration based on the politics *in* restoration.

## INTRODUCTION

Ecological restoration refers to a broad set of practices directed toward the amelioration of human impact on ecosystems, and has been defined by the Society for Ecological Restoration as “the process of renewing and maintaining ecosystem health.” Rooted in traditional practices of land reclamation and motivated by the urgency of environmental degradation, ecological restoration has fused practical skills with (scientific) ecological knowledge to form a coherent environmental discipline.\*

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<sup>1</sup> Minutes of the meeting of the Board of Directors, Society for Ecological Restoration, 13 September 1995.

<sup>2</sup> See William Jordan, III, M. E. Gilpin, and J. D. Aber, *Restoration Ecology: A Synthetic Approach to Ecological Research* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); John Berger, *Environmental Restoration* (Bar Harbor, Maine: Bar Island Press, 1988). The terms *ecological restoration* and *restoration ecology* are routinely interchanged in the literature with confusing consequences. We propose to follow the convention that the latter refers to the body of scientific

For the past half century, in earnest over the past decade, ecological restoration has proved capable of returning specific types of damaged ecosystems to a "natural" state and, in some cases, has created ecosystems *de novo* (e.g., wetland mitigation projects). The Society for Ecological Restoration (SER), formed in 1987, has grown rapidly with several thousand members in North America and a growing number of international members. *Restoration and Management Notes* was joined two years ago by a refereed scientific publication, *Restoration Ecology*, now the official publication of the SER. Institutionalization of restoration practice is imminent with the formation of the New Academy for Environmental Restoration, an initiative piloted by several senior members of SER. Government and corporate funding of restoration initiatives is rising rapidly, as are the number of practitioners who call themselves restorationists. For example, in an attempt to remedy damage done through extensive channelization of the Kissimmee River in Florida, various government agencies are spending hundreds of millions of dollars on returning the river closer to its earlier meandering condition.<sup>3</sup> As traditional approaches to ecosystem preservation reach their practical limits, ecological restoration will assume a more prominent position on the environmental policy agenda.

A sharp debate has developed over the extent to which humanistic theoretical considerations, political worries, and cultural values are important in charting the development of ecological restoration.<sup>4</sup> Most writers in the field explicitly (and often exclusively) bolster the authority of scientific or technical criteria in the assessment of what counts as a good restoration. Others give implicit assent to scientific restoration through their avoidance of wider concerns.<sup>5</sup> On the opposite side, a number of writers have shown recently that restoration either ought to include or necessarily does include dimensions that cannot be reduced to traditional scientific concerns.<sup>6</sup>

This debate will be new to many readers of *Environmental Ethics* who are likely to be more familiar with ecological restoration as it has been discussed in several recent articles and in Robert Elliot's earlier essay, "Faking Nature," published in *Inquiry*.<sup>7</sup> Such philosophers as Elliot and Eric Katz<sup>8</sup> take a dim

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research directly concerning the restoration of ecosystems. Ecological restoration is a more inclusive term incorporating the wide-ranging practices and knowledges that constitute the broad definition given above (i.e., ecological restoration subsumes restoration ecology). However, regardless of this convention, the criteria for evaluating ecological restoration and restoration ecology as practices are most often thought to be the same.

<sup>3</sup> Louis A. Toth, "The Ecological Basis of the Kissimmee River Restoration Plan," *Biological Sciences* 1 (1993): 25-51.

<sup>4</sup> See Eric Higgs, "Expanding the Scope of Ecological Restoration," *Restoration Ecology* 2, no. 3 (1994): 137-45.

<sup>5</sup> For example see A. D. Bradshaw, "Ecological Restoration as a Science," *Restoration Ecology* 1, no. 2 (1993): 71-73.

<sup>6</sup> William Jordan et al., *Restoration Ecology*; Eric Higgs, "The Ethics of Mitigation," *Restoration and Management Notes* 9, no. 2 (1993): 138-43.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Elliot, "Faking Nature," *Inquiry* 25 (1982): 81-93.

<sup>8</sup> Eric Katz, "The Big Lie: Human Restoration of Nature," *Research in Philosophy and*

view of restoration, regarding it as a technological practice (a "big lie") that distracts attention from the more important matter of environmental preservation. By their account, whatever is produced by ecological restoration certainly isn't nature, especially in the sense that nature may be described as a repository of intrinsic value. Mark Cowell has the same worry, but sees in restoration the potential for developing "a lasting 'participatory-gardener' relationship."<sup>9</sup> In achieving this relationship, however, restorationists must reject traditional concepts of a "static" nature and the dualism that stipulates "wild" nature as good and human-manipulated nature as necessarily sullied. This rejection, of course, requires a new participatory ethos. Alastair Gunn argues directly against Elliot's view that the value of a restored ecosystem is necessarily less than a putatively "original" one.<sup>10</sup> The issue, in part, stems from an overdetermined idea of restoration. For Gunn, restoration is an obligatory response to environmental destruction, and it trumps the matter of whether or not any specific restoration is capable of returning an ecosystem to a former state (Gunn thinks such high standards are practically impossible to meet). These important ethical debates have not, regrettably, had much effect on professional restorationists. In fact, there has been almost no productive interplay between practitioners and philosophers.

"Productive" is here something of a judgment call. There has in fact been a good deal of attention in the pages of *Restoration and Management Notes* to a version of Katz's "Big Lie."<sup>11</sup> Since its publication, several responses have been published to the article, primarily in the form of letters to the editor.\*\* But mostly the tone of these responses has been almost entirely defensive on the part of restorationists and has not led to any significant further interchange between philosophers and practitioners in *Restoration and Management Notes* or the field.<sup>13</sup> Regrettably, Katz's work is held up more as an example of why practitioners ought not to listen to theorists at all rather than as a significant

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*Technology* 12 (1992): 231-42; Eric Katz, "The Call of the Wild," *Environmental Ethics* 14 (1992): 265-73.

<sup>9</sup> Mark Cowell, "Ecological Restoration and Environmental Ethics," *Environmental Ethics* 15 (1993): 32.

<sup>10</sup> Alastair S. Gunn, "The Restoration of Species and Natural Environments," *Environmental Ethics* 13 (1991): 291-310.

<sup>11</sup> Eric Katz, "The Ethical Significance of Human Intervention in Nature," *Restoration and Management Notes* 9, no. 2 (1991): 90-96.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Steven Rassler, "Naturalness and Anthropocentricity," *Restoration and Management Notes* 12, no. 2 (1994): 116-17.

<sup>13</sup> One exception to the tone and quality of these letters is found in part of an article by Donald Scherer which attempts a serious objection to Katz's argument. See Scherer, "Between Theory and Practice: Some Thoughts on Motivations Behind Restoration," *Restoration and Management Notes* 12, no. 2 (1994): 184-88, esp. pp. 186-87. A more philosophical version of this article was published as "Evolution, Human Limits, and the Practice of Ecological Restoration," in *Environmental Ethics* 17, no. 4 (1995): 359-79. It may be fair, however, to characterize the Scherer-Katz exchange as another intramural debate between philosophers rather than as a serious exchange between theorists and practitioners.

philosophical challenge to their work that ought to be seriously addressed. One of us has taken this non-exchange as a paradigmatic example of how philosophical reflection on the environment ought to be tempered with the pragmatic imperatives of environmental practices.<sup>14</sup> We feel that a strong argument can be made for paying a greater degree of attention to the modes of communication used by philosophers in their interaction with environmental practitioners. Such communication should seek to carefully balance philosophical rigor with the commitment to improving environmental quality and human-nature interactions, which for is the *raison d'être* of environmental philosophy. For these reasons we do not seek in this article to engage the current philosophical debates on restoration in environmental ethics, but instead try to mark out a new territory in the philosophy of ecological restoration that speaks to the debate going on among restorationists over the role of humanistic concerns in evaluating restoration practices.

In this paper we focus on two types of political concerns that arise as theoretical problems involving ecological restoration: the politics *in* restoration and the politics of restoration. By "*involving* ecological restoration," we are referring to a political context in which it is assumed that in some sense it is settled what the practical referent of ecological restoration is and where ecological restoration *per se* can be considered as a sphere of activity that interacts with other spheres of activity--cultural, political, aesthetic, and **technological**.<sup>15</sup> We hope that this approach will nourish productive debate within and between the philosophy and restoration communities.

Politics *in* restoration refers to questions about the possible political dimension in ecological restoration considered as a whole. For example, what is the inherent nature of the politics associated with the practice? Stemming from this area of interest are the politics of restoration, or the political use to which restoration projects may be put.<sup>16</sup> We believe that the politics in restoration is theoretically consistent--the political issues involved in restoration as a practice remain the same regardless of the location of the project. But the politics of restoration are a different matter. From our perspective, which is grounded in a Gramscian-inspired critical theory, the context within which a restoration physically occurs (the economic, political, and social spheres around it) is crucial in determining its political role in the broader culture. Restoration as the mere application of scientific technique--or as the extension of a **global** paradigm-anywhere, anytime, no longer makes sense.

<sup>14</sup> See Andrew Light, "Materialists, Ontologists, and Environmental Pragmatists," *Social Theory and Practice* 21, no. 2 (1994): 315-33, esp. pp. 324-25.

<sup>15</sup> The contrast drawn here is to theoretical problems in restoration ecology, the sort of thing that philosophers like Katz and Elliot seem to be interested in.

<sup>16</sup> This distinction was first introduced in Andrew Light, "Hegemony and Democracy: How the Politics in Restoration Informs the Politics of Restoration," *Restoration and Management Notes* 12, no. 2 (1994): 140-44.

In the first half of this paper, we argue that there is a democratic, participatory potential within the practice of ecological restoration. But because this **eman**cipatory egalitarianism is only potentially part of each act of restoration, we also argue that it is the politics of restoration that determines whether that potential ever emerges. In the second half, we make a case for how different political contexts (those in Canada and the United States) condition the democratic potential for each restoration. To accomplish this task, we offer **corporate**-sponsored restorations in the United States as an example of how ecosystems become commodified to serve the interests of global capital, and thus the extension of global capital's paradigmatic relationship with nature-as a commodified object to serve the process of consumption. The cost of this process is the abstraction away from restoration's local circumstance, which may be the key to its positive political potential.

Canada, in contrast, has a tradition of nationalizing nature, and has therefore gained wider public assent for state interventions in ecological management including restoration, which cuts against the trend to commodify nature. Of course, the contrast between Canada and the United States is not this sharp in practice. Still, we argue that neither nationalized nor commodified nature offers a political setting wherein the democratic potential in restoration can be realized fully. The richer political context that we propose values the complicated local circumstances that lead to effective restorations, and in this way to a more participatory kind of ecological practice. Commodified or nationalized restorations fit well within contemporary patterns of globalization, a tendency that we believe erodes the democratic potential of restoration.

## THE POLITICS IN ECOLOGICAL RESTORATION

Our claim that there is an important (even undeniable) political element of restoration will be on a firmer basis if an argument exists for a political component of human-nature relations more generally. In the recent collection, **Beyond Preservation**, Carl Pletsch partly delivers such an argument by pointing out that most modern discussions of the human relationship with nature have included an element which specifically addresses their political **dimen**sions.<sup>17</sup> By suggesting that the human-nature relationship since Locke has been structured in terms of sovereignty, Pletsch's point goes even deeper. Because, as he claims, the legacies of Bacon and Newton give us reason to believe that nature is something that we can have sovereignty over, and because sovereignty over anything is in itself a political matter, it is surely the case that the consideration of a nature over which we can have control contains a dimension of control that is at least in part political. Other theorists, such as Carolyn

<sup>17</sup> Carl Pletsch, "Humans Assert Sovereignty Over Nature," in *Beyond Preservation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), pp. 85-89.

Merchant, have given a more detailed account of the implications of the modern world view on our attitudes toward the natural world that also claims a political component to this relationship.<sup>18</sup> Pletsch argues that ecological restoration represents the culmination of the sovereignty view, albeit a form of sovereignty which is more supportive than destructive.

Even without Pletsch's account, the story of the inherent political dimension of ecological restoration is easy to articulate. Ecological restoration as a current in the environmental mainstream is partly a reaction to preservation." Proponents of restoration may or may not want the practice to substitute for preservation—this controversy is unimportant here. What is important is that preservation does have an inherent political dimension. Preservationists claim that not preserving some thing in nature that ought to be preserved violates a moral and a political obligation. Under whatever description of the moral basis for preservation (nonanthropocentric, biocentric, or weak anthropocentric), a moral obligation to attempt to preserve some part of nature follows the extension of a preservation principle to some thing in nature. A theory which demands that some bit of nature be preserved and does not find objectionable the behavior of someone who does not preserve that bit if they can, will be inconsistent, if not incoherent. The political obligation involved here is that the political sphere should be organized such that what needs to be preserved can be preserved. People need to be free to comply with their moral obligations. To preserve some part of nature that politically has been designated as an area for development is inherently political because it commits the preservationist to a view that the political system needs to be changed in order for that part of nature to be preserved. A decision by a preservationist not to preserve is also inherently political (where the existing political authorities have also decided not to preserve), since it tacitly assumes that, at least in this case, the political system is functioning effectively with regard to that particular preservation decision.

Proponents of ecological restoration step into the domain of preservation and argue for an alternative to this human interaction with nature for a variety of reasons (e.g., redemption, mitigation, etc.). When they step into this role, restoration becomes inherently political in the same way that preservation is political. As a practice it is imbued with choices—what to restore and what not to restore—like the choices regarding what to preserve and what not to preserve. Any decision to restore, therefore, is inherently political against the background of the political governance of nature. We are not claiming here that everything has such a political dimension, or that every human interaction with

<sup>18</sup> See Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature* (New York: Harper and Row, 1980).

<sup>19</sup> See the account of this relationship in A. Dwight Baldwin, Judith DeLuce and Carl Pletsch, "Introduction: Ecological Preservation versus Restoration and Innovation," in *Beyond Preservation*, pp. 3-16.

nature has a political dimension, only that every act of restoration contains a political dimension. Sometimes this political dimension is contentious and sometimes it is not. Sometimes it is so trivial that it isn't even worth thinking about.

Many practitioners are averse to the claim that restoration has an inherent political dimension.<sup>20</sup> Why? The most straightforward answer is that the general pejorative character of politics turns people off to any suggestion of a connection between politics and something important or beneficial. Politics makes things dirty. We assume that to talk about something's politics is to draw attention to its unsavory elements. But to reduce politics to such a one-dimensional aspect of any sphere of activity is wrong. Still, this approach seems to be the norm for political discussions of ecological restoration.<sup>21</sup>

Our view, again, is that the political dimension inherent in restoration must first be explored before a substantive critique of the politics of restoration can be engaged. A full investigation of the politics in restoration ought to include an investigation of the scope of its normative political elements. *If* there is some positive value always potentially at work in ecological restoration, then there is a foundation upon which the improper practice of restoration can be judged, as well as weighed against the background of a larger political context.

William Jordan, III, one of the most influential writers on ecological restoration, and the editor of one of the two main journals in the field, has tried with some success to articulate a coherent restoration ecology paradigm.<sup>22</sup> Included in his program are cultural, social, and fortunately political elements. A close look at his work reveals that Jordan would be unsatisfied with the singularly pejorative views of political power at work in some analyses of restoration. Jordan proposes that ecological restoration has a political component which is inherently democratic. In his discussion of element five, "change and adaptation," of his ecological restoration paradigm, Jordan claims: "What

<sup>20</sup> In the past three meetings of the Society for Ecological Restoration, we observed a marked discomfort on the part of delegates in taking political positions, and also relatively little interest in engaging political issues.

<sup>21</sup> For example, the exchange between Constance Pierce and Frederick Turner over the politics of restoration in *Beyond Preservation* is a paradigmatic example of how thinking about politics as simply a dirty issue produces insubstantial discussions of the political dimensions of and in restoration. See Constance Pierce, "The Poetics and Politics of Prairie Restoration," in *Beyond Preservation*, pp. 226-33, and Frederick Turner, "The Invented Landscape (Reprise)," in *Beyond Preservation*, pp. 251-59. For critique of both sides of this debate see Andrew Light, "Hegemony and Democracy."

<sup>22</sup> Jordan's journal, *Restoration and Management Notes*, as we briefly noted at the beginning of this paper, was for some time the only journal in the field. The tacitly accepted division between *Restoration and Management Notes* and *Restoration Ecology* is that *Restoration and Management Notes* covers matters of primary interest to practitioners (including wider cultural, political, and social issues in restoration), while *Restoration Ecology* aims for a more scientific audience. It is not clear, however, that this division of labor holds, or indeed that it ought to be maintained. See Higgs, "Expanding the Scope of Ecological Restoration."

is involved [in ecological restoration] is a continual dialogue rather than a program, paralleling in our dealings with the biotic community the dialogue that sustains a democratic society and makes it adaptable to **change**.<sup>23</sup> Jordan has in mind the sense in which restorations are organized around communal activities for communal concerns. In what Jordan takes to be examples of restoration, people tend to participate by and large as equals, creating an egalitarian framework within which restorations are performed. Here is a possible foundation for the politics in restoration. Ecological restoration ought to connect us to each other as participants in a process that should be integrated into a close communal connection with the land.

Nevertheless, even though Jordan's claim makes the politics in restoration more complex, it may also simplify the concept of democracy too much. On Jordan's account, ecological restoration can be described as inherently democratic, but only in terms of what appears to be an overly stipulative definition of restoration: all restoration is democratic by definition. There doesn't appear to be any reason why democracy or egalitarianism inheres in the simple act of restoring a landscape unless the act necessarily must be prescribed within a certain context. If we do that, then we must be prepared to argue that certain acts are not restorations by definition, specifically those performed under undemocratic conditions. Otherwise, why would we rule out restorations performed by slaves, voluntary masses blindly following an autocratic dictator, or contractors uncritically obeying the dictates of a zealous regulator?

There seems to be no reason to call into question such restorations on purely technical grounds. A restoration produced by slave labor result in a wonderfully diverse and healthy ecosystem. Thus, some other criteria is needed to establish that such a practice couldn't possibly be an ecological restoration (or at least a good one). Although such criteria has to demonstrate that all restorations share a common character that omits nondemocratic practices as good restorations, simply stipulating democracy as a condition of restoration is an unsatisfactory way to achieve a shift in our understanding of what counts as a restoration. An argument is needed for why the democratic potential in restoration ought to be preserved in all cases. It is insufficient philosophically to simply assert the priority of democracy to restoration, and practically unsound to expect that because this condition has been boldly asserted, it will be followed in practice. Restoration is not inherently democratic as Jordan argues; nevertheless, it does have an inherent democratic potential within its inherently political domain. The problem is not simply to identify this potential, but to make a case for why it is part of the criteria of what makes restoration unique as a good environmental practice.

To explain more fully the participatory potential, we need to consider again

<sup>23</sup> William Jordan, III, "Sunflower Forest: Ecological Restoration as the Basis for a New Environmental Paradigm," in *Beyond Preservation*, p. 27.

from a normative standpoint what happens in a restoration of nature in contrast to an act of preservation. Both activities produce some sort of value, with each token containing its own **content**. However, the **character** of the two values produced by the two practices is generally quite different.

No new value is produced in an act of preservation because it preserves only the values that exist antecedent to the act of **preservation**.<sup>24</sup> Because no new value in nature is created, no value is actively produced by the agents engaged in acts of preservation. They are doing something good, without a doubt, but they are not producing a value as a restorationist is when he or she restores some bit of nature that has been degraded. Restorationists are distinctive, therefore, as value makers in nature.<sup>25</sup> In this sense, the good for nature produced by a restoration is distinctively bound up with the good for the human community of restorers.

For the preservationist, of course, there is value in the act of preserving and there is an existent value in nature that is preserved. But these two values are distinguishable. One can imagine a situation in which a bit of value in nature is preserved without any preservationist needing to do the preserving. For example, an act of preservation can occur by accident if a bit of land changes ownership and the new (very wealthy and distracted) owners simply forget about it, inadvertently leaving it protected and untouched. In this case, the mere change of ownership is not an act of preservation but instead a maintenance of a value based on contingent events. Such a case is distinguishable from one in which a bit of land is intentionally preserved through a public political process. In both cases though the value of the nature preserved was the same while the value of the act that produced the preservation was not.

Restoration is not the same. The value of the act of restoration and the value of the restoration itself are inextricably linked because restorations do not occur accidentally.<sup>26</sup> As a result, an assessment of restoration as a practice must involve both the act as a value in the community and the product as a value

<sup>24</sup> We are assuming here, of course, that the value of the land is not simply reducible to the value given to it by a valuing agent. Nevertheless, the claim against such a reductive account does not necessarily have to be made in terms of intrinsic value. Again, the debate between intrinsic and instrumental value theorists need not be resolved at this time, and we believe that our analysis still holds regardless of the outcome of this disagreement in the environmental ethics literature. We are assuming that most preservationists and restorationists admit that the value of nature is not merely reducible to value added by humans.

<sup>25</sup> Although the specific content of the value produced in a restoration is philosophically up for grabs, we bracket out the question, which such theorists as Katz and Elliot are interested in, of whether restorations can produce "nature," in the sense meant by those who attribute intrinsic or inherent value to nature. Suffice it to say that some kind of value is produced in a restoration, which may or may not represent the intrinsic value of nature. Perhaps it only has the value attributable to a human artifact. Still, this value could be quite important as is the case with some great buildings and artifacts. Also see Cowell, "Ecological Restoration and Environmental Ethics."

<sup>26</sup> If swaths of degraded land were left untouched for many years, some things might come back

in nature. Part of the distinctive value of restoration, therefore, is the production of this simultaneous positive value. One could even make a case that this value is not purely instrumentally anthropocentric since the practice of restoration is not solely a good for the community, but is also the production of some kind of value in and for nature.<sup>27</sup> Importantly, the value to the community and the value to nature can be assessed separately, but as a practice, they are produced together.

Because of this interaction of values to nature and value to the community involved in the practice of restoration, the value of this value is at least marked by its participatory elements. At its core, we can define restoration as public participation in nature. The content of the values that are produced in a restoration may vary, and at this time be hard to discern, but no matter what they are they have the same character. The character and the content of the value of restoration are tightly connected. A restoration with a poor character produces a bad content. A bad restoration, characterized by a lack of community participation in the act, produces a value that is marked by this loss of the egalitarian potential of restoration for the community; this loss in value is uniquely felt at the local level where the special character of a community's relationship with the land is intimately tied to the practice of ecological restoration. The inherent democratic potential of ecological restoration is thus, in a strong sense, a potential for **local** human-nature relationships.

In terms of our account, there is no inherently undemocratic potential in restoration.<sup>28</sup> To not fulfill the democratic potential of restoration is a failing of a restoration project, and, as we argue below, can be used as part of an overall assessment of what counts as a good ecological restoration.<sup>29</sup> If we are right that a democratic potential exists in each act of restoration, and it is true that

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(the length of time varies from one type of ecosystem to another), but there is no assurance that these regenerated ecosystems would be functionally and structurally sound. An "accidental restoration" would be considered a "recovery."

<sup>27</sup> A strict intrinsic value theorist would, of course, reject this argument. But at the very least, if a restored ecosystem became a habitat for some nonhuman animals, then the restoration would have produced a nonanthropocentric instrumental value. On the plausibility and importance of this type of value, see Eugene Hargrove, "Weak Anthropocentric Intrinsic Value," *The Monist* 75, no. 2 (1992): 183-207.

<sup>28</sup> There is the nagging question of whether restoration can be connected with fascism, either metaphorically through the idea of "rooting out exotics," or through some more direct historical connection. Bill Jordan takes up and provides a good answer to the question of the metaphorical connotations of restoration in "The Nazi Connection," *Restoration and Management Notes* 12, no. 2 (1994): 113. Donna Haraway voices the worry over the direct connection in a brief exchange with Light reprinted in *Society and Space* 13, no. 5 (1995): 523-24. For reasons we will not go into here, we don't think either of these arguments are sound. We are currently at work on a manuscript that will in part take up these questions more fully: "Beyond Lifestyle: Restoring a Politics of Commitment in Bioregionalism," in *The Bioregional Primer*, ed. Michael McGinnis (London: Routledge Press, forthcoming).

<sup>29</sup> For a more complete argument describing the qualities of a good ecological restoration see Eric Higgs, "What is a Good Ecological Restoration?" *Conservation Biology*, forthcoming.

there are forms of practice that are inherently undemocratic, then it is the case that restorations performed using undemocratic methods are not living up to their potential. In accordance with this political criteria, they are bad restorations in the same way that a restoration that failed to achieve its technical merits can be called a bad restoration. Below we take up the question of the range of restorations which fall into the political category of bad restorations.

First, however, we need to show how a political atmosphere can be encouraged in which the language of ecological restoration can be bound up with a reference to democratic principles. Only in such a context are we able to preserve the unique political value in restoration. If Jordan's stipulative view is insufficient for this task, then how do we embed democratic politics in the practice? One answer that more fully acknowledges the complexities of political arguments can be found in Antonio Gramsci's notion of hegemony.

#### HEGEMONY AND POWER

Gramsci saw two ways in which political authority is formed: consent and power. Power is the straightforward rule of law enforced through state police power, while consent is formed through hegemony, or the political "normalization" of certain practices and restrictions (including the use of language) in certain ways.<sup>30</sup> Consider the following example of the power of consent: all things being equal, in the United States, the market is allowed to govern exchange of private property and by and large Americans find thinking of nature primarily as a resource to be appropriate and acceptable. Although laws may be formed around our consent to those practices, the practices themselves are not originally juridical. Americans generally find it odd to think differently about their relationship to nature. Even if some of us can envision a different relationship to nature, we expect most Americans unconditionally to accept this property relationship as normal. No laws need be passed to enforce this view of nature over others; the view has rather become hegemonic.

Anything that has a political content is open to appropriation for the purposes of forming hegemony in support of some interest. Even though ecological restoration is not inherently democratic, it is inherently political and can be turned to serve the political interests that we associate with democracy rather than some other political power structure. However, democratic interests will be served only if it seems odd to people that an undemocratic restoration is considered a good restoration. The hegemony model requires us to fight for the political (and linguistic) associations of restoration, rather than trying to stipulate them in one way or another. We need actively to create a political climate in which the discovery that a technically perfect restoration was

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<sup>30</sup> See Antonio Gramsci, *The Prison Notebooks*, trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Smith, (New York: International Publishers, 1971).

performed by forced labor, would cause most people to rethink their judgment that the restoration itself was a good one. While it may seem intuitively plausible to many of us that such restorations aren't good ones, in the current climate among restorationists, in which they tend to assess restorations only on their technical merit, it is difficult to get many people to assent to a claim that public participation in a project should be counted as one of the criteria for assessing the quality of a restoration.<sup>31</sup>

We separate the linguistic from the political in the previous paragraph because the language of restoration is very much in flux at the moment. Within the Society for Ecological Restoration there has been a lot of debate in the past few years over how to (and whether to) define *restoration*. Other attempts to define *restoration* so far include a strong, contentious, normative content in the definition.<sup>32</sup> At stake here, for example, is whether wetlands mitigation efforts (one of the most privatized-and lucrative-forms of restoration work) will be accepted by the community of restorationists as acceptable forms of practice.<sup>33</sup> A view of the politics in and of restoration has to accommodate these disputes and provide a framework from within which we can understand the necessity of engaging in an active political struggle over these issues. Our approach is also more realistic than simply comparing the results of these debates with preconceived notions of what is inherent in the practice, and then expecting our definition to make the needed argument for us.

Given such a combination of issues involved in the determination of what is a good restoration (or a restoration at all), and following from our earlier comments about the relationship between the content and character of the value produced in a restoration, the approach here must distinguish carefully between the *process* of a restoration (and the judgments we could have about it), and the actual *product* of the restoration. The politics in restoration speaks to the process, while the politics of restoration is concerned with the product. The key to a successful critique of the product, we contend, is careful examination of the process. If the process is thought to be apolitical, as, we argue, is the case with many, if not most, restorationists today, then nothing stops the product from having a positive content merely on technical grounds. Under these conditions, the technically proficient restoration, for example, one performed by slave labor, is a good restoration.

<sup>31</sup> This was certainly our experience at the 1994 SER conference, where a version of the argument in this section was presented.

<sup>32</sup> See the editorial "Definitions, Definitions, Definitions," *SER News* 17 (1994): 5.

<sup>33</sup> Given the interests specifically of the U.S. federal government in such projects, the linguistic and political components of the hegemony of restoration will certainly converge. The issue here however is not a paper tiger; there are important restoration practitioners who resist the acceptance of wetlands mitigation for scientific as well as political reasons. See Nic Korte and Peter Kears, "Should Western Watersheds be Public Policy in the United States?" *Environmental Management* 17, no. 6 (1993): 729-34; and John Munro, "Wetland Restoration in Context," *Restoration and Management Notes* 9, no. 2 (1991): 80-86.

The advantage of the hegemony view over Jordan's is that it acknowledges the fact that politics is dynamic. We have to fight for political ground; things are not automatically as we would want them to be. The hegemony model acknowledges this ground as one in terms of which we must struggle: it pushes us to fight for a recognition of the democratic potential in restoration in part by emphasizing that an undemocratic restoration is a loss to the dual value of the practice.

## THE CONTEXT OF THE POLITICS OF RESTORATION

So far we have discussed the politics *in* restoration and argued that this politics has an inherent democratic potential. This point is important both because not all practices have such potential and because it is necessary to acknowledge the politics in practices in order to have a place from which to criticize the use to which they are put. For example, we would find it contradictory if some regime claimed to be democratic and yet persisted in engaging in such practices as political torture of dissidents as a normal function of state police power. Such a practice is inherently undemocratic; its existence is a sign that such a regime is not really a democracy. However, if we failed to acknowledge the political dimension of state torture, it would be more difficult to critique it as inconsistent with a broader diagnosis of a country's political climate. A politically neutral practice is consistent with any political regime; it can be put to whatever use desired without worrying about whether doing so is ideologically consistent.<sup>34</sup>

The importance of acknowledging the political dimensions of a practice holds true for restoration. If we fail to take seriously the politics in restoration (as many in the restoration community are wont to do), then we will most likely find it much more difficult to criticize the political use to which restoration is put. If restoration is apolitical, then it isn't inconsistent with any broader political aims. In this way, again we can see that the politics *in* restoration informs the politics of restoration. Nevertheless, it is the politics of restoration which sets the political context in which restorations occur and determines whether the politics in restoration ever achieves its full participatory potential.

The specific political context of restoration that concerns us in the next section is corporate sponsored ecological restorations. In the past decade an increasing number of corporate restorations have been undertaken, ostensibly to demonstrate corporate environmental concern. It takes only a light scraping of the surface to expose distressing political motivations that run against the inherent democratic potential of restoration. An overwhelming majority of

<sup>34</sup> For a helpful discussion of the relationship between politics and practices see Andrew Feenberg, *Alternative Modernity: The Technical Turn in Philosophy and Social Theory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

these corporate restorations are located in the United States. What accounts for this phenomenon? We argue that the answer lies in the distinction between commodified nature and nationalized nature. The rise and prominence of commodified nature, corporate restorations being one example, suppresses the inherent democratic potential of ecological restoration. Nationalized nature, a consequence of heavy state involvement in Canada in environmental and natural resource management, produces a kind of restoration that is at once, ironically, more democratic and more easily assimilable to commodification. An alternative, one which is flourishing in the divides and fissures between these two "natures," is localism. A large number of volunteer community projects involving restoration manifest the democratic potential of the practice and give hope for its success. Localism, of course, is fragile and vulnerable to both nationalism and commodification. Without a thorough understanding of the politics in and of restoration, it will wither. We turn to this theme later in the paper.

#### CORPORATE RESTORATIONS

If the political context of restoration is ignored, a proper evaluation of the corporate appropriation of restoration may not be possible. Corporate sponsored projects often place restoration in an undemocratic context. Too often this context is accepted uncontroversially by the restoration community. When corporations appropriate restorations to serve only their own interests in increasing their positive image with respect to their relationship with nature, restoration is turned into a means to satisfy a capital end and little else.

Jonathan Perry's work demonstrates this danger by examining the restoration projects of IBM and Red Wing Shoes outside of **Minneapolis**.<sup>35</sup> These prairie restorations were undertaken, on Perry's analysis, to increase the cultural capital of each corporation as a friend of nature and a regionally grounded local enterprise:

... surrounding the headquarters with bioregionally specific restorations-such as prairies-provides a ready-made set of grounding regional motifs to a company that can locate (and relocate) almost anywhere, and which may derive its income from non-restored landscapes elsewhere. Corporate location strategies and accumulation practices are symbolically presented as natural and are confirmed, thereby, as less contestable forces in the socioeconomic environment. Taken together, these naturalizing tendencies can help foster the notion of a tidy fit between a corporation and its environment, an environment actually improved through corporate **activities**.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Jonathan Perry, "Greening Corporate Environments: Authorship and Politics in Restoration," *Restoration and Management Notes* 12, no. 2 (1994): 145-47; Jonathan Perry, "The Commodious Veil of Nature: Ecological Restoration as Corporate Landscape Architecture" (Master's thesis, University of Wisconsin, Madison, 1995).

<sup>36</sup> Perry, "Greening Corporate Environments," p. 146.

For example, IBM selectively advertises its role in restoring a "prairie dreamscape" at its plant without acknowledging its own role in eliminating the prairie and the healthy environment of the site, or admitting its complicity in the degeneration of other large land holdings. Even though it is certainly true that consumers are complicitous in the destruction of the landscape, too, there is some tension between foregrounding environmental beneficence over a background of environmental malfeasance. Thus, Perry argues, visitors to the area receive more than a botanical education when they visit the IBM site; they also get an indoctrination into the relationship between IBM and nature that best serves the interests of the corporation.

Perry gives a detailed reading of corporate landscapes and their problems as an adequate restoration on technical criteria (for example, he points out the sloppy work at these sites that is inaccessible from a casual drive-by view). But it is also important to point out that both the method of restoration (hired workers, hierarchically organized) and the purpose (publicity to increase commodity consumption) are not necessarily democratic or egalitarian, and depending on one's view, could be considered to be intrinsically anti-egalitarian. Are these practices good restorations, for example, on Jordan's account, which requires restoration to be democratic? No. But it seems counterintuitive to simply assert that these corporate projects are not **really** restored areas. We can easily imagine that people looking at these landscapes would find them perfectly acceptable as good restorations. Only the most committed **restorationist** who followed Jordan's arguments would say otherwise. Corporations, whether they intend to or not, have appropriated the language of good restorations by successfully labeling their projects as such. Absent some stipulation in the definition of restoration that requires a democratic character to the act, nothing prevents this association in the minds of most people. Here we see the power of hegemony to form consent-in this case consent about what counts as a good restoration. A good restoration is one that merely results in a good product. Importantly, no sinister intention by corporations or individuals is needed to establish this hegemonic description of acceptable practice.

We think that whatever this type of corporate restoration is, it is something other than a good restoration; it is an appropriation of an image of nature for capital interests just like the images of pristine nature used on television commercials to sell cars and beer. Our strong intuition is that these images are not in nature's interest (however one may want to construe this), or in the interest of promoting democratic practices, or establishing strong links between local human communities and nature. These projects are inherently political acts containing a specious political content. They assert implicitly that it is uncontroversial to use nature for private capital interests. Nature, according to this account, is just a pleasant background to **consumption**.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>37</sup> For a fine application of this intuition to environmental organizations see L. M. Benton, "Selling the Natural or Selling Out?: Exploring Environmental Merchandising," *Environmental*



We can break this appropriation of restoration, not by just stipulating that all restorations must be democratic, but by considering seriously the politics of fulfilling the inherent democratic potential in restoration. We know from Gramsci that a conscious political movement can make the *argument* that this sort of practice-undemocratic restoration-is not a restoration, or at least isn't a good restoration, because it doesn't attempt to live up to the local democratic potential in ecological restoration. Perry's example reinforces our earlier claim that there is more to ecological restoration than simply a good product; the process of restoration provides much of the political content. What goes into a restoration project, the processes which are historically contingent for each project, is suppressed in the hegemonic assent to a technically proficient product as the sole criteria for what counts as a good restoration. In the corporate case, the process is increasingly obscured from the local community and the unquestioned acceptance of these projects encourages apathy to the politics of restoration at large. The way in which the restored area could have enhanced the local relationship with nature, and served as a vehicle for public participation in the work of the community's relationship with nature, is gone. Following our earlier analysis, the unique value produced by restoration is irrevocably lost in such projects. Therefore, one of the significant political challenges for restorationists is to open up the politics of the practice to a wider view in order to offer an alternative to the corporate approach to nature.

#### NATIONALIZED NATURE: CANADA AND THE UNITED STATES

Fortunately, the commodification of restoration is not universal. Moreover, there is evidence that this trend has not advanced as far, or at least not in the same way, in Canada. There are, for example, few high-profile corporate-headquarters restorations (an exception is the controversial headquarters for Ducks Unlimited in Manitoba), but such direct comparisons are complicated. Alexander Wilson addresses the difficulty of comparing Canada and the United States at the beginning of his study of the North American landscape:

These are global phenomena [the commodified representations of nature], but I am writing from this place, North America. The places I talk about are *exemplary* places: places that reveal both the *cohesions* and disruptions of the past fifty years; places redolent of the power of the land; places overlaid with another, cultural,

*Ethics* 17 (1995): 3-22. Certainly the *argument* that such restorations do harm to nature requires a better argument than we have simply hinted at here. We are currently at work on a paper which tries to make just such an argument tentatively titled, "Restoration, Inc." The only argument we are entitled to here is that the type of corporate restorations identified by Perry are not good restorations because they do not achieve the democratic potential of restoration as a practice.

environment-that of advertising, or tourism, or telecommunications. . . . While natural environments know no political boundaries, cultures certainly do. The border between Canada and the United States-which used to be called "the longest undefended border in the world" until it became a joke-drops in and out of view in this discussion. Rarely is there a specific comparison between Canadian and U.S. places, although I have tried to draw out distinctions where they are revealing.<sup>38</sup>

For Wilson it was insufficient to conduct a study in which the two countries were either separated or overlaid, demonstrating the problems with U.S.-Canadian comparisons.

Canada is a "lite" socialist democracy, formed out of the colonial aspirations of England and France, and later, in the twentieth century, by the commercial colonialism of the United States. Canada and the United States are each other's largest trading partners. The mercantile authority of the United States has produced a branch plant economy in Canada. With few exceptions, most corporations are foreign-owned and most of these are American (although national *corporate* identity is becoming more difficult to discern in a globalized economy). The entertainment industries, Hollywood and the television networks, have overshadowed Canadian cultural production. The identity of Canadians is unclear, and this lack of clarity seems to be the plainest mark of that identity.

Canada and Canadians have been active in ecological restoration, but the pattern of involvement reflects the branch plant mentality. The late Robert Dorney, an innovator in both micro-scale (less than one-tenth acre) urban ecological restoration and landscape-level restoration in Canada, was trained at the University of Wisconsin.<sup>39</sup> Canadians have been active in the Society for Ecological Restoration, and hosted the fourth annual conference of the Society in 1992 in Waterloo, Ontario. The conference drew several hundred Canadian restorationists (or at least people who expressed interest in restoration), but such a turnout of Canadians has not been matched at subsequent conferences held in the United States. The Society for Ecological Restoration is based at the University of Wisconsin-Madison Arboretum; there is no autonomous Canadian organization.

Across the country, restoration projects are underway on every kind of

<sup>38</sup> Alexander Wilson, *The Culture of Nature* (London: Blackwell, 1992), p. 16.

<sup>39</sup> Eric Higgs, "A Life in Restoration: Robert Starbird Dorney 1928-1987," *Restoration and Management Notes* 11, no. 2 (1993): 144-47. Dorney studied briefly with Leopold in the late 1940s. Though often forgotten in the treatment of his environmental philosophy in *Environmental Ethics*, Aldo Leopold was important in the development of what is now understood as ecological restoration. He was the Director of the University of Wisconsin-Madison Arboretum until his death in 1949. See Curt Meine, *Aldo Leopold: His Life and Work* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988).

ecosystem, and this activity appears to closely match the kinds of efforts undertaken in the United States (with the United States a leader in semitropical wetland and prairie restorations and Canada a leader in boreal peatland restoration). There are corporate sponsorships of restoration projects in Canada. For example, **Cargill**, a multinational corporation, is funding a major wetland restoration scheme on Frank Lake in southern Alberta to help mitigate feedlot effluent. While educational institutions have not moved as aggressively in Canada to develop opportunities for restoration training, the University of Victoria is developing a modest initiative and other universities are beginning to remodel their land management programs to reflect ecological sensibilities.

Comparisons beyond the anecdotal, however, are difficult. There is at present no repository of information on restoration projects in North America to make such a study feasible. There is no easy way of determining, with certainty the extent of the pattern of commodification. What we offer instead are conjectures based on our observations. The heavy hand of government in Canada has created an extensive network of natural areas-parks, reserves, ecologically sensitive areas, conservation areas-expressly in the public interest. Large land benefactors, nongovernmental conservation organizations, such as the Nature Conservancy, have been far less prominent in Canada. Only in the last decade, with the arrival of a new conservatism in federal and provincial governments, has there been extensive planning for the privatization of parks and campgrounds and the development of financial incentives for private protection.<sup>40</sup>

Population pressures have been modest in most regions of Canada as compared with the United States. The sense that there is always a hinterland lying beyond the edge of settlement is a profound part of the Canadian psyche. It is simplistic to admit, but the end of the "frontier" never occurred in Canada. Where enormous pressures have been building for restoration of degraded landscapes in the United States as the only reasonable option for natural space in many regions, such awareness has only crept into Canada in the last two decades. The response, once again, is coming from government organizations. For example, a consortium of university researchers and staff in Jasper National Park (Canada's largest Rocky Mountain park) is developing an ambitious research program, the first of its kind in Canada, of which one part is a comprehensive regional ecological restoration program. Here the public good is expressed directly, albeit cloaked in the complicated interjurisdictions of educational and governmental institutions.<sup>41</sup> What does such a project,

<sup>40</sup> For a critique of this trend see Andrew Light, "The Environment as a Public Good," *Wild Lands Advocate* 3, no. 2 (1995): 9, 14.

<sup>41</sup> The story, of course, is more complicated. A recent push for industry collaborative projects has led to lavishly-funded research programs such as the "model forests" springing up across the country. Increasingly, conservation and environmental research is linked directly with industrial sponsorship.

focusing on nature as a central component of national identity, tell us about the democratic potential of restoration in Canada?

Canadian nationalized nature creates a wider opening for the democratic potential of restoration to emerge than American corporatism. Of course, this observation fades quickly if one is aware of the hegemonic consent that accompanies large-scale "public" projects. That the opening exists does not necessarily ensure democratic projects will pass through. Further, the overwhelming pressure of American commodity culture, especially in light of recent free trade accords, is forcing the rapid loss of distinctive Canadian approaches to land management. Commodification is a globalizing phenomenon, and we predict it will become a determining factor in future restorations. Restoration will be valued on the corporate model, inasmuch as it appeals to the interests of consumers. Projects such as the one proposed for Jasper challenge commodification by placing public interests first and by taking a long-term view of participation. It is projects of this type that will keep open democratic involvement. Equally or more important are the numerous local restoration projects organized by volunteers across the continent interested in returning loving attention to places that have been damaged.<sup>42</sup> These projects persist precisely because of a fierce social and political will that overcomes a fixation on consumption. But these are fragile connections to the landscape and are endangered by a lack of democratic political resolve.

Perhaps American environmentalists could look to Canada as a model of how best to preserve a participatory context of restorations at the national level. Perhaps, with a concentrated effort on the part of American environmentalists, a culture of nationalized nature in the United States could be reinforced, thereby pushing the profile of restorations closer to that found in Canada.<sup>43</sup> But, given the current political climate in both countries, we hesitate to rely either on the continuance of nationalized nature in Canada or on the possibility of an environmental movement reforming around this issue in the United States and finding itself successful in the face of conservative challenges. Instead, at bottom, the hope for the preservation of participation as a part of restorations is best placed in local projects. This is not to say that we favor a naive localism

<sup>42</sup> See Karen Holland, "Restoration Rituals: Transforming Workday Tasks into Inspirational Rites," *Restoration and Management Notes* 12 (1994): 121-25.

<sup>43</sup> We say "reinforced" here because of the undeniable truth of the existence of some form of nationalized nature in the United States. For the historical roots of this form of nationalized nature, see for example: Perry Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956), Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 3d ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), and Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995). Whatever the extent of the origins of American nationalized nature, it is our strong intuition (having both lived and worked in each country, and one of us having grown up in the U.S., and the other in Canada) that a nationalized "use" of nature is much stronger today in Canada than in the U.S.

on all environmental questions, but only that this particular struggle for the character of restoration is best fought on individual home fronts, before the fight can be taken to larger arenas.<sup>44</sup> Only when the contested terrain of the politics of restoration is won in the minds of local restorationists will we be able to draw a line against corporations and governments feeding the growth of a culture of commodified nature.

### CONCLUSIONS

Ecological restoration will be democratic in practice only if we make it so by politically shifting the terrain of discourse about restoration. Reasons must be given why democracy and egalitarianism are wedded to restoration as a practice, pushing the case that to think otherwise is counterintuitive. To accomplish this task through a change in consent seems the most democratic way to stop the bad political use to which restorations are put. The strong democratic potential in ecological restoration makes a fully democratic politics of restoration an ideal that we will never achieve in all cases. Nevertheless, the ideal gives us a base upon which we can critique non-democratic restorations on grounds other than simply their scientific or technical merit. In terms of the argument we have made here, we can acknowledge, for example, that corporate restorations are good on some criteria (perhaps in their physical execution), but that they may be lacking in other respects, such as their political context. For practical policy questions, this analysis gives us the leverage to argue that public money spent on restorations must require that they live up to their beneficial democratic potential. Also, this argument drives a wedge between corporate self-presentation and public response: the context for appreciating good restoration enlarges under this criteria so that corporate projects are open to critique as crude commodifications of nature.

From a Gramscian perspective we can see, however, that the terrain (literal and figurative) of restorations is up for grabs, which, of course, following Gramsci, is exactly what we should expect. Subtle differences in two countries as alike as Canada and the United States are enough to create disparities in their ability to realize the potential for democratic practices in restorations. The potential for restorations to be democratic exists in each country simply because this potential always rests in the practice. Nevertheless, this potential must be recognized. If it is not, then the difference between Canadian and U.S. restorations may become simply one on a long list of quaint, antiquated diversions on an otherwise seamless landscape-like varying differences

<sup>44</sup> Several fine descriptions of local ecological restorations exist. See for example, Denis Rogers-Martinez, "Northwestern Coastal Forests: the Sinkyone Intertribal Park," *Restoration and Management Notes* 10 (1992): 64-69; William K. Stevens, *Miracle Under the Oaks: the revival of nature in America* (New York: Pocket Books, 1995); and Freeman House, "Dreaming Indigenous," *Restoration and Management Notes* 10 (1992): 60-63.

between our respective currencies, loons in Canada, and public monuments in the United States. But such an outcome is still slightly optimistic since at least some democratic potential would be fulfilled in some Canadian national restorations, regardless of whether that effect was recognized. The alternative is far worse: if corporate hegemonic control of restoration with its multinational force triumphs, then good restoration in both countries becomes indistinguishable even to the trained eye. Because of this threat, the fight over the politics *in* and of ecological restoration is a struggle for the future of the very identity of nature in North America.

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