

12. The Fallacy of Ecomessianism: Observations from Latin America

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Today it is widely acknowledged that the severe environmental problems we face are closely linked to social problems. The 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) placed the environment firmly on the development agenda, and environmentalists, once regarded as severe critics of the development process, are now asked by governments, businessmen and citizens alike, to provide solutions to the problems it has created. It is assumed that the measures proposed by environmentalists, when implemented throughout the whole of society, will prove to be effective.

One of the more recent and threatening phenomena in this context is the emergence of messianic positions. This 'ecomessianism' seems to be typified by inordinate faith and certainty, that is without reason or proof, that environmental and ecological ideas can serve as agents of change.

In this regard two observations can be made. First, some environmentalists believe that they are entrusted with a mandate to save not only human life, but all forms of life on the planet; they are deeply imbued with a sense of justice toward all living creatures. Second, within the environmental movement – especially some Northern groups – there are organizations or individuals who believe that they have the knowledge and the human and financial resources which entitle them to lead the environmental movement, and hence all of society, on the only true road to Earth's salvation.

The ideas, concepts and values and the measures proposed are all linked to a new discourse: the 'ecocratic' discourse – in which 'eco' stands for ecology, and 'cratic' refers to the Greek *cratos*, that is, power and authority. Today, this ecocratic discourse embraces a wide series of issues: from the extinction of species to pollution, from agrochemicals to the greenhouse effect, and so on. It should also be noted that this mode of discourse is held not only by environmentalists, but also typifies current thinking among such influential institutions as, for example, the World Bank or the European Economic Community (EC). This is matter for concern.¹

Distorted images

Many of the North's environmental organizations have distorted images of the South's environmental problems, including those affecting ecosystems and local communities. In some cases, their views are so reductionist as to nullify all possible alternatives. For example, in the North, the main ecological problem in Latin America is commonly identified as 'deforestation', and the image that springs to mind is of the Amazon rainforest. This view has led to Latin America being seen solely in terms of the Amazon rainforest. Such distorted images can be found even in what are regarded as competent and reliable sources, such as the World Resources Report of 1990-91, edited by the World Resources Institute. In that Report, the identification of another area of environmental concern - the Andean mountains - slightly extends the region.

Such literature thus largely ignores other major ecosystems (such as Patagonia in Argentina, Llanos in Venezuela, for example) thereby furthering the reductionist view in so far as the implication is that no environmental problems exist outside those ecosystems considered.

But scientific evidence tends to contradict such a reductionist view: for example, the highest deforestation rates are to be found in the Paraguayan sub-tropical forest (4.7 per cent compared to 0.4 per cent in the Amazon forest). Deforestation occurring in the cold woodlands (southern Chile, Argentina) could be an even greater disaster, as the eco-systems' surface is small and regeneration rates are low.

Another aspect is the interaction between these distorted images and the media. Journalists tend to select the more dramatic and simplistic images to offer the public at large, as exemplified by headlines such as 'The Amazon rainforest: the lungs of the earth'. Here again, vegetation experts have shown that the temperate boreal forests, or any other ecosystem comprised of green plants, are as much a 'lung' as the Amazon rainforest. Nevertheless, these distorted images tend to engender widespread belief among concerned people, environmentalists, politicians, and so on that the Amazon is a key ecosystem, not only at the local level, but worldwide.

In this context, the apparent ignorance or trivialization of environmental problems in areas transformed by men, such as agricultural land or urban settlements, should be noted. Latin America's environmental problems tend to be reduced to wilderness-related ones, while the impacts of, say, cattle-ranching or those affecting millions of people living in mushrooming megalopoli, are seemingly disregarded. Possibly these problems receive scant attention from Northern organizations because of the social dimensions involved, and the potentially serious political conflicts which could be linked to them.

The scientific superiority complex

There are shared responsibilities for this situation. While targetting journalists, politicians and laypersons, the role of scientists should not be overlooked. Whether from the North or the South, scientists are part of the group who believe themselves to be charged with a mandate, and possess the knowledge, to determine the viable management of nature. Human beings' relationship to nature is divorced from any political connotation and presented as a strictly scientific and technical problem. Therefore, only those trained in specific fields can determine how to conserve or use wilderness, natural resources or any other attribute of the environment.

The statements of D. H. Janzen, a well-known ecologist working on conservation measures in Central America, exemplify this view:

The tropical ecologist has a clear mandate to be a prominent guide . . . Ecologists are specialists at understanding interactions between complex units and their environments; the future of tropical ecology lies, above all, in the interface between humanity and the tropical nature that humanity has corralled. It is this generation of ecologists who will determine whether the tropical agroscape is to be populated only by humans and their mutualists, commensals, and parasites, or whether it will also contain some islands of the greater nature – the nature that spawned humans yet has been vanquished by them.²

Some environmentalists invoke scientific evidence as the only basis upon which to propose specific solutions and measures. This kind of belief, rooted in a number of scientific disciplines (the environmental sciences), may easily lead to the deluded notion that scientific knowledge is superior to all others; Western knowledge in particular always being considered superior to grassroots knowledge.

While disregarding the fact that even among scientists there are extremely diverse positions – and that there is no agreement on such facts as the actual extent of the Amazon rainforest, the rate of deforestation, potential for recovery and so on – it is often forgotten that grassroots' knowledge, that is of farmers, indigenous peoples, and marginalized urban communities, is also very rich and complex in so far as relations between human beings and nature are concerned.

So this superior stance in relation to scientific knowledge is another manifestation of a messianic posture. By weakening public and open discussion on how society as a whole should manage its natural resources, and how to share the benefits accruing therefrom, the paradox is reached whereby environmental postures minimize the political dimensions involved, and produce ecocratic discourses which inhibit a discussion about its propositions, hidden contradictions and absence of alternatives.

Hidden links

The distorted images underlying messianic views are also supported by links that are usually hidden or ignored by the public at large, yet they are influential in the decision-making process. For example, in the heated debt-for-nature swaps debate, an influential document (published in 1989)³ was presented as a Latin American view on the issue. A closer look, however, reveals that some sections are almost identical to an article published in the *Journal of Environmental Affairs* in 1989.⁴ Neither paper makes reference to the other. The problem is not one of priority, but rather where and by whom such ideas are generated and why this issue was not properly addressed. Sooner or later these linkages are discovered, and serve only to create suspicion in the South, undermining the solidarity essential for the international environmental movement.

Another important dimension in distorting images is language. International journals, magazines, books, and so on, are usually published in English. For example, Spanish and Portuguese literature describing environmental problems and ecosystems are rarely circulated in the North. Access to this literature is usually mediated by a Northern academic centre that classifies, analyses and summarizes information from the South and publishes the results in English, when it is made available to the Northern groups.

The North's pedagogic tendency

This tendency is demonstrated by the North attempting to teach the South how to attain sustainable development. But, for example, there are no Latin American networks advising how to deal with, say, Canadian and US Pacific forests.

The problem here is not with the intentions: these are usually good. The basic effect, however, is a transfer of Northern perceptions and potential solutions to the South. This is not a dialogue. Furthermore, since the Northern positions, as we have seen, are the result of distorted images, there should at least be some discussion on the proposed solutions.

But the reality is different. Messianic and pedagogic stances can contribute to an increase of international constraints on development policies as a result of the Northern environmental perspective. The environmental conditionalities now linked to multilateral development bank loans exemplify this. This may be seen as positive, because it obliges Southern governments to follow some minimal environmental measures, but it also opens the way to political intervention in internal affairs. This in turn can invoke reactions like that of the Indian environmentalist Guha

(1989), who stated that the 'wholesale transfer of a movement culturally rooted in US conservation history can only result in the social uprooting of human populations in other parts of the globe'.⁵

The metaphysics of globality

Distorted images tend to lead to a focus on global problems, and the regional and local ones directly linked to them. This presentation of global problems is in itself reductionist and displays a messianic tendency: the apocalyptic scenarios, where no one is safe, where rising water levels or ultra-violet radiation can affect anyone in the near future. Understandably, the public begins to feel the need for 'ecological' responses to these 'ecological' problems.

Let us come back to the distorted image of the depletion of the Amazon rainforest as Latin America's main environmental problem. This is also seen as a global problem. In fact, such key ecosystems are identified as the common heritage of humankind. The fact that it is a global concern then becomes the rationale that justifies the right of every nation to participate in decisions on how such areas should be managed.

The establishment of 'global' environmental problems has a radical exclusive characteristic: all regional and local Latin American problems are now of secondary importance compared to the global ones. Furthermore, there is an intrinsic contradiction in considering these 'global' problems. Why are only environmental problems 'global'? It is now widely acknowledged that environmental problems are the result of multi-dimensional causes: why then analyse them separately? The adjective 'global' is thus imbued with a metaphysical quality: it is more a matter of faith than fact.

Features of the ecocratic discourse

Ecocratic discourses, linked with the aforementioned messianic tendencies, are now extending their influence beyond the governments of industrialized countries to the South's governments and environmental organizations. Examples of this can be found in the Tropical Forest Action Plan, the second World Conservation Strategy, UNCED's Biodiversity Convention and some of the climate change debates.

In this context, some scholars are of the opinion that the growing interest of citizens in the environment is largely due to a new discourse of the environmentalists. Actually, my opinion is that the contrary is so: I think that in essence, the environmental discourse is very similar to that in the

early 1970s, at the time of the first UN Environmental Conference in Stockholm; the main ideas, objectives and outlook have been maintained. It is true that new issues have been raised, in particular those related to biodiversity, genetic resources and the like. The ethical dimensions of the problems are also increasingly emphasized; and it is interesting to note that some of these new issues originally emerged from outside the environmental movement (for example, that of the depletion of genetic resources).

But if the essence of the discourse is the same, what has changed in the past 20 years? The foremost fact is that society now perceives them differently: the same discourses are producing 'truth effects', that is, they are seen to contain true and valid statements that should be followed not only by the single individual but by the whole of society.

The common belief of the 1960s and 1970s – that environmentalists were a bunch of eccentric radicals – has died away. Today, important sectors of society, both North and South, recognize that the environmental discourse invokes ideas of common justice and welfare. Furthermore, the discourse is no longer of a radical and oppositional nature; it has in fact been adopted by the very sectors which had been criticized in the past. Concern for the environment now extends across all society and inevitably it reproduces the diverse and often contradictory aspects of any society or nation. This feature is particularly striking in times of great public apathy and lack of grassroots mobilization.

As mentioned above, the environmental discourse now offers not only a diagnosis of current problems, but also offers measures on how to deal with them. There is in this context an underestimated effect of power: an ethical basis and legitimacy are given to set up new norms and institutions in our societies. Today, we further witness that this discourse is also championed by non-environmentalists. Thus, the already heterogeneous nature of the environmental movement – and its exponents, each with a different proposal to attain the needed measures – is 'enriched' by the arrival of a wide panoply of new actors, such as businessmen and politicians, who also present environmental concerns as a main part of their proposals. This confusion does not allow the environmental discourse to identify the specific steps needed to set up effective norms or institutions. It does, however, provide the needed consensus that 'new' and 'environmental' institutions are indeed legitimately needed, and that the ecomessiahs are entitled to set them up. Unawares, therefore, the messianic eco-discourse contains very clear political consequences.

The new policy of conservation

This new scenario opens the way to an environmentalism imbued with a

neo-liberal atmosphere. In other words, the ideology of progress need not be abandoned, rather, the necessity of nature conservation is presented as an integral part of economic growth, instead of in opposition to it. Natural resources that in the past were outside the market are now internalized; economics now embraces what had been left out. Societal interactions are reduced to economic and market transactions, environmental management is put in the hands of private interests. A new brand of environmentalist is born, who, while still interested in nature, has abandoned all concerns for solidarity and social justice.

The ecocratic discourse thus presents a framework for conservation which invests in the potential economic value of natural resources. Wilderness is now seen as a consortium of banks (gene banks, seed banks, and so on); fees will have to be charged for the use of such banks, and so on. Paradoxically, human beings may become a problem in such an interpretation of wilderness; they may interfere with natural ecological processes. In any event indigenous populations must be removed.

This is where sustainable development becomes sustainable economic growth, where a new ecological wisdom becomes the tool to open a new era of welfare and growth. A messianic posture, rooted in the positivist belief that science is superior to other forms of knowledge, based on the reductionist vision of society as synonymous to market, basically anti-utopian, where the balance of power and domination remains unchanged. The whole UNCED process, in which governments repeated *ad nauseam* that ecology is part of their objective for growth, the establishment of a Business Council for Sustainable Development and the like are eloquent examples.

Shared responsibilities, shared actions

It is not my intention to present Northern governments and environmental movements as the 'new' problem, thus reviving old polemics about ecological imperialism. My objective is to show that both in the South and in the North, the environmental movement is a heterogeneous and complex thing, and that governments are slowly entering the environmental dimension, without, however, abandoning their basic postulates. A new danger has thus arisen, whereby the environmental movement has provided the old credo of 'economic growth at any price' with a new look: 'economic growth with a sense of limits'. The ecocratic discourse legitimizes policies which can affect all society and nature as well, while conferring upon ecomessiahs the right to become the new agents of change.

The environmental movement should not be trapped into making a superficial assessment of this phenomenon, nor should it consider all

Northern governments to be cynics, or all Southern governments to be the champions of nature's protection. This drama is not played out in black and white, but encompasses varying shades of grey. So, if it is true that Northern governments impose conditionalities on natural resources in the South that they themselves were unable to protect in the North, this does not mean that, for example, Latin America should not take seriously its current problems and shield itself from the global issues as a way to flee its responsibilities for industry, deforestation, pollution, and so on. On the contrary, the South should develop its own agenda, in fact as many agendas as possible, and consequently respect the agendas of others, seeking joint efforts and actions as a new sign of international solidarity.

To fend off the danger inherent in ecomessianic postures, the environmental movement should call upon one of its vital features and strengths: self-criticism, and the capacity to look for basic ethical stances. Whether in the North or in the South, this criticism should focus on all forms of power, wherever messianic and authoritarian expressions are in evidence towards humanity or towards nature. A new relationship to nature involves a new relationship among people. Power, which immobilizes and corrupts, is also a major ecological disaster, which must be fought everywhere, even among those of us in the environmental movement. In this struggle, all actions must be shared, because the responsibilities are shared: whatever the result, our failure or our success will affect us all.

Notes

1. My source of data is derived from a study on the interrelationships of Northern environmental organizations (governmental and non-governmental) with the non-governmental organizations in Latin America. Part of the study focused on the relationships of US organizations with those in Latin America, and later I obtained further data on European organizations. My data base is about 1,500 organizations in Latin America, most of them related to networks on environment and development (ELCI), conservation (IUCN, CIPFE), social ecology (CLAES), theology and ecology (CIPFE), and alternative agriculture (IFOAM). I have had contacts and interviews with all major environmental organizations and institutions in the USA and many of those in Europe.

2. D. H. Janzen (1986) 'The Future of Tropical Ecology', *Ann. Rev. Ecol. Syst.*, Vol. 17, pp. 305-24.

3. L. R. Sevilla L. and Q. A. Umaña (1989) *Por qué canjear deuda por la Naturaleza*, Washington, Nature Conservancy, WRI and WWF; M. Simons (1988) 'Vast Amazon Fires, Man-made, Linked to Global Warming', *New York Times*, 12 August.

4. D. Page (1989) 'Debt-for-nature swaps: experience gained, lessons learned', *Journal of Environmental Affairs*, Vol. 1, pp. 275-88.

5. R. Guha (1989) 'Radical American environmentalism and wilderness preservation: a Third World critique', *Environmental Ethics*, Vol. 11, pp. 71-83.

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