

Sustainability, Culture and Ethics: Models from Latin America

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ABSTRACT *In order to develop sustainable relationships with the natural environment it is necessary to focus on approaches that may yield workable models of sustainability. Here I sample a few approaches from Latin America that point toward a promising model of sustainability. I argue that these approaches share the idea that the natural environment is in very close interdependence with human beings and their communities. I also outline the beliefs and practices of certain Latin American populations which exemplify this idea, and conclude that the crucial feature for achieving sustainability is a particular type of cultural matrix.*

Introduction

While the field of environmental ethics has been maturing over the last 20 years, the rate of environmental degradation of natural ecosystems on our planet unfortunately has continued to accelerate. In the light of this situation it is becoming evident that, if we are going to develop sustainable relationships with the natural environment, our search should now focus on approaches that may yield workable *models* of sustainability, that is, models of the types of behaviours and attitudes that reflect an ethic of care for the continuing functioning, and even flourishing, of natural processes.¹

Certainly there is a plethora of theories in environmental philosophy and in other disciplines that focus on the conditions leading to an appropriate human–environmental relationship. It is not my intention to survey them here but rather to sample a few approaches that point toward a promising model of sustainability.

In what follows I begin by briefly discussing what I mean by ethics and by introducing approaches suggested by eloquent spokespersons in Latin America, for redrawing the human–environmental relationship in our societies. I propose that there is a common theme represented in these approaches, insofar as the natural environment is conceived as being in very close interdependence with human beings and their communities. In the next section I consider populations in Latin America

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that, through their beliefs and practices, exemplify what this conception of the relationship of human beings to nature ought to be. I conclude by suggesting that the crucial feature that brings about, and maintains, these sustainability-enabling beliefs and practices is a particular type of cultural matrix.

Ethics and the Human–Environmental Relation

Ethics is the study of ways of acting and feeling that are perceived to be normatively loaded in terms of right and wrong or good and bad. As commonly discussed in philosophy, morality is a contested issue. It has been argued that it is a matter of acting according to correct rules, backed up by ultimate principles; or of taking note of rights and responsibilities, as derived from a more general system of ethics; or of living according to certain virtues, justified by certain ultimate values; and so on.

I propose that, for the sake of this essay, an ethic or a morality may be understood as a form of living which recognizes that certain entities in our world have a distinctive value, which, in turn, demands certain appropriate attitudes and ways of acting. An ethic is the result and expression of certain experiences, of the development of particular relationships, and of the dialectic resulting from simultaneous commitment to, and critique of, one's community's (at least tacitly) agreed upon values.

Furthermore, as Anthony Weston has remarked, a theory that elucidates a form of living appropriate to sustainable relationships to the natural environment may require the previous development of certain practices (Weston, 1995). This view has been echoed by Latin American scholars who point toward certain already existing, albeit threatened, models of sustainability. Here I review three approaches that point toward an implicit ethic of care for the nature that surrounds us: ethno-ecology, social ecology and liberation/restorative ecology.

These three approaches have the virtue of being roughly complementary to each other. While ethno-ecology emphasizes the power to shape attitudes inherent in personal, direct acquaintance with the natural environment, when guided by time-tested, traditional ways of knowing, social ecology and liberation/restorative ecology point toward social commitments and even to affective dimensions with regard to that environment. More specifically, social ecology points toward the need to stem certain threats to the combination of human beings and their environments, while liberation ecology argues for the necessity of openly embracing non-human nature.

Ethno-ecology, Social Ecology and Liberation/Restorative Ecology

Ethno-ecology

Ethno-ecology studies the relationship of a community with its natural environments insofar as that relationship is reflected in local knowledge of plants, animals and ecosystems (often called traditional ecological knowledge) accumulated diachronically over long periods by people who live in close dependence on the land.² Ethno-ecology seeks to understand the kind of knowing that most people in urban centres, and many agricultural settings, have lost, but may acquire again if these ways of knowing continue to be maintained in contemporary living cultures.

Víctor Toledo, a well-known Mexican ethno-ecologist, argues that this approach can give us insight into the type of relationship with the natural environment that will maintain the long-term sustainability of natural environments as well as the livelihoods of the human communities inserted in them (Toledo, 1997). In his analysis, ethno-ecology teaches us that sustainable development at the community level requires the maintenance of traditional ecological knowledge, and so he directly couples the defence by communities of *both* their particular cultural *and* natural endowments.

Toledo is seconded by Enrique Leff in his insistence on the importance of community control of the cognitive factors that co-determine its future. In his book *Green Production* Leff argues that 'The objective of ecodevelopment, defined as a strategy for the production and application of knowledges and techniques necessary for the sustainable management of particular ecosystems, is a social process inserted within the struggles of each community for the appropriation of their natural resources and their social wealth' (Leff, 1995). What Leff has in mind is that development, when appropriate, is dependent on knowledge and techniques regarding the natural environment held and controlled by the communities dependent on it.

This view is also explicitly endorsed by Toledo, who says that, in the face of threats of incursions from state-sponsored and corporate entities, sustainable community development requires that a community 'take (or retake) control of the processes that affect it'.³ This requires, among other things, the acquisition and consolidation of 'a community conscience' (Toledo, 1997, p. 239). This brings us to the next approach for redrawing the human–environmental relationship in our societies that is prominent in Latin America.

Social Ecology

As understood by Eduardo Gudynas and Graciela Evia, social ecology studies the ways in which the activities of contemporary citizens—who are mostly located in large urban centres and engaged in manufacturing, processing and consuming goods ultimately based on natural resources—can be brought into consonance with ecological processes (Gudynas & Evia). Importantly, in their analysis, social ecology needs to go beyond the divisions between the social, the human and the natural sciences. So understood, social ecology incorporates the perspectives of biologically oriented human ecology as well as anthropological ecology, but aims at an explicit integration of human agency, understood as *socially embedded*, within natural environmental contexts.

Gudynas and Evia's social ecology is in accord with its North American variant (as represented by Murray Bookchin (Bookchin, 1995)) in its focus on the *modes of domination* that affect both human and non-human systems, but it explicitly seeks to incorporate the insights arising from Latin American life conditions. In particular, they point toward the perspectives on human–environmental relations developed by traditionally living people of Latin America. As we will see further below, social ecology, interestingly, does not remain at the theoretical level in this region of the world, but has an embodiment in certain social movements (for example,

in Amazonia) with notable practical consequences for human well-being and natural sustainability.

Liberation/Restorative Ecology

A third approach, for redrawing the relationship between human beings and the natural environment, as found in Latin America, is what we may call liberation or restorative ecology.⁴ In the largely North American discussion of ecosystems restoration it recently has been proposed that restorative activities be conceived as a way to restore not only a certain integrity to ecosystemic processes but also a certain quality in the relationship that we human beings may have with the non-human natural beings that surround us (see Jordan, 2005). The idea is that, although we may be alienated from our natural environment, due to contemporary socio-economic and ideological conditions, we may recover an appropriate relation to that environment through a certain type of activity or practice (i.e. through ecological restoration).

I propose that the term ‘liberation/restorative ecology’ may be the most adequate to describe the kind of reflection and ethic called for by Leonardo Boff, a Brazilian liberation theologian, in the presence of the linked crises of radical impoverishment and environmental degradation.⁵ In his recent writings Boff argues for an ethos of care and compassion for the Earth in conjunction with such care and compassion for our fellow human beings. He says, for example, that ‘The earth has arrived at the limits of its sustainability. Our task is not to create sustainable development, but a sustainable society—*human beings and nature together*’ (Boff, 1999).⁶ According to Boff’s analysis, human beings and natural environments are jointly going through a severe crisis due to a failure to recognize our true human nature, which, on his point of view, is that of *care*. Now, since human beings are implicated in a fundamental way with the natural environments that surround them, attaining a full realization of our humanity requires that we develop an ethos of care with regard to those environments and all other natural beings comprised in them.

So, one way of understanding Boff is that, through the restoration of an appropriate relationship between human beings and the other natural beings, there will be a freeing (liberation) of human and natural potentialities. As another example of such a viewpoint, we may consider the perspective of José Gómez Hinojosa, who similarly speaks about liberation/restorative ecology from a philosophical–theological perspective (Gómez Hinojosa, 1990). He argues for the possibility of a ‘naturo-centric’ approach. From Gómez’s perspective, if we pay attention to the common trajectory that human beings share with the rest of nature we will stop seeing ourselves as separate from nature, and hence we should stop exploiting it as mere object. Taking a hint from Ernst Bloch, Gómez explains how we may see nature as subject, and ourselves as part of that subject (also see Katz, 1997, 2005). From this he concludes that we will perceive ourselves as living *with* nature and not simply *in* nature. The consequence of such a change of perspectives would be both a liberation of nature and a restoration of our relationship to it.

Community, Resistance and Autonomy

The common thread among these three approaches to the human–environmental relationship is that they all argue for the importance of recognizing a deep, everyday, interdependence between human beings and their communities and natural environments. Each of these approaches points toward the idea that the natural environment, which sustains human livelihoods, is, or should be, considered part of the community. Importantly, this perspective is reflected by actual practices in many Latin American communities, as I illustrate below. Before introducing those cases I propose that we take note that Latin American environmental theoreticians also emphasize that environmentally appropriate ways of living demand strategies of resistance and autonomy, in relation to the prevailing, modernizing and globalizing, socio-economic forces.⁷

Roberto P. Guimarães speaks of environmentalism of the last 50 years as a form of ‘resistance to the modernity “of consumerism”’. Guimarães is careful to point out, however, that it is not a question of joining or not joining in the processes of modernization, but, rather, of deciding ‘which sort of insertion [into the globalized economy] is convenient to us, which sort of insertion allows us to take control of growth on a national level and which sort of insertion allows us to maintain our cultural identity, social cohesion and environmental integrity in our countries’ (Guimarães, 1999, p. 160, emphases added).

Toledo, similarly, points out that ‘in Mexico, as in the rest of the world, rural communities are permanently under siege by the destructive forces of a “modernizing development” (based on the destruction of nature and of the community and the consecration of the individualist interest)’ (Toledo, 1996, p. 2). Consequently, Toledo includes autosufficiency in his description of the nine principles that may lead to sustainability in *campesino* and indigenous communities (Toledo, 1996, p. 1).⁸ Insofar as, according to Toledo’s analysis, what is threatened by unsustainable practices is the human community as well as their environment (and not just a separable entity called the natural environment), a sophisticated strategy of resistance of both human beings and environment to external domination, and an innovative approach aimed at autonomy, are called for.

In agreement with Leff and Toledo, another researcher working in Mexico, David Barkin, shows that in the rural areas of Mexico biodiversity and sustainability of the natural environment are directly dependent on the *degree of autonomy* of communities of indigenous people and other *campesinos*. Consequently, he proposes that ‘it may be possible and necessary to promote a new form of local autonomy: a social structure that allows people to rebuild their rural societies, produce goods and services in a sustainable fashion while expanding the environmental stewardship services they have always provided’ (Barkin, 1998, p. 1).

Sustainable Practices and Implicit Environmental Ethics

Land-based Populations and Cultural Identities

Anthropologists and geographers have shown that different conditions generate different socio-cultural relations to the natural environment. This certainly can be

confirmed in Latin America, where there is great diversity in history, geography, geology, botany, demography, ethnicity, etc. The relations to the natural environments that characterize different sections of the population are correspondingly diverse and, moreover, in constant flux insofar as conditions change. Such relations can be analysed from various perspectives.

As of late, political ecology has emerged as a leading way of analysing human relations to the environment. Peet & Watts (1996) describe its 'theoretical heart' as the linking of political economy with ecology.⁹ Various political ecologists have argued that, in spite of the increasingly global push and pull of market forces, which demand that people as much as resources become mere mobile instruments for the reproduction of capital, there remain some populations notable for their tendency to maintain residency on the lands of their ancestors (see, for example, Bebbington, 1996). The reasons people have for opting for continued residency are diverse, ranging from affective relations with land and people to their pride in using 'traditional' (also called 'local') knowledge about techniques and resources of the place, or simply comfort in staying put where they grew up and their ancestors have lived. The land-based cultural identity of such populations generally is carefully defined, and counts for them as a value worthy of protection for itself.¹⁰

As processes of modernization and globalization reach such closely knit populations, significant dislocations can occur, though. Greater access to markets for agricultural products, for example, may generate opportunities for the acquisition of formerly unavailable manufactured goods, but may also bring local agricultural products into competition with those produced in more economical ways elsewhere. The result may be, on the one hand, relative impoverishment and considerable, persistent out-migration of young people to city and industrial centres as labourers, and, on the other, increasing replacement of traditional ways of producing food and other goods with 'modern', introduced ways (see Bebbington, 1996). Concretely this may mean, for example, that, where agriculture before was entirely 'organic', it may end up highly reliant on synthetic fertilizers and pesticides, on commercial seeds and so on.

The transformation of agriculture and lifestyles away from self-sufficiency and toward dependency on external actors and factors is a step in the wrong direction, from the point of view of theoreticians and activists who seek to maintain or reactivate traditional, less harmful ways of interacting with the natural environment, but may be perceived as necessary for bare survival by the populations involved. The interesting thing is that many populations who are at the crossroads between a traditionally sustainable and an increasingly unsustainable (external input-dependent) way of life offer *significant resistance* to these kinds of forces of change. In fact, we find that the commitment among such populations to resist anything that might undermine traditional values is accompanied by a reassertion and progressive elaboration of those values,¹¹ and by a drive to strengthen the community's autonomy and autosufficiency against outside forces, represented by large-scale commercial or government entities. The autonomy pursued tends to be such as would allow for the continued flourishing of the longstanding mixed ecologies in which people live.

Toward Human–Environmental Sustainability: Some Cases

I offer a sample of cases of populations that conceive of their communities as including the non-human parts of the environment along with the human parts, as may be found in many areas of Latin America, and elsewhere in the less developed world. Such populations do not suppose that the natural environment is a domain apart from that occupied by human beings, but rather individuate and attribute value to something like ‘hybrid’ human–environmental spaces. I begin with a description of the beliefs of the Native people called Mapuche (the term literally means ‘people of their land’), who live in the border region between Chile and Argentina, followed by brief accounts of the environmental practices of populations of extractivists and Native people of the Amazonian region of Brazil, and of groups of *campesinos* and indigenous people of Mexico.

The Mapuche, like people from many small-scale societies that traditionally have directly depended on their natural environment for survival, exhibit a remarkable interweaving in their beliefs of the roles of human beings and nature. Historically the Mapuche suffered from the conflict with the Spanish and subsequently, on both sides of the border, from conquest by the respective government troops. Although in more recent times some communities were granted a certain degree of autonomy on their traditional lands within drastically reduced boundaries, they have become subject to new threats to their integrity by petroleum industries and industrial forestry practices brought in by transnational companies, which through clear felling deprive them of the traditional forest cover and its medicinal plants, and create hazards due to erosion (MacKinnon & McFall).

The Mapuche explain that insults to their lands are insults to them because their community encompasses both human and non-human parts of the land. Both in Argentina and in Chile the Mapuche have proudly declared their intention to resist the various incursions into their communities.¹² For the Mapuche human beings are just one element among many others in the universe (*wajmapu*) in which everything is finely balanced and interrelated with every other thing, including the animals, spirits, plants, waters and landscapes (McFall, 2000). They state that:

Mountain, forest, lakes, high lands, and...the river are [the Mapuche’s] lived-in landscape, the place where they were born and where they were raised. The Mapuche have always cared in a special way for the elements and forces or *newenes* of the natural world that surrounds them, the Itrofil Mongem (biodiversity), and have always given access to all the human beings that wish to enjoy the place as long as they respect the environment for which, as original inhabitants, [the Mapuche] act as ‘natural auditors’.¹³

The belief that human beings are deeply entwined with the other elements of their environment, including the alpacas or the maize-corn, but also ‘The river, the stones, the stars, the wind’, and so on, is common among diverse Latin American peoples, such as the Quechua (see Rengifo, 1996). Eduardo Grillo, for example, speaks of a symbiotic community such that the Andean people who raise animals and those animals together constitute something like a family (Grillo, 1996).

Further east, indigenous populations and extractivists who live in Brazil's Amazonian region have had to contend not only with large corporate interests, intent on clear felling their lands and setting up cattle ranches, and the establishment of dam and mining projects,¹⁴ but also (perhaps paradoxically) with government departments set on creating new parks. Unfortunately the creation of parks, intended for the protection of biological diversity, generally has followed a model conceived in North America, which calls for the exclusion of human inhabitants for the protection of the purity of the natural environment enclosed in park boundaries (Diegues, 2001).

In the Amazonian region (and in other regions like it), where apparently untouched, 'wild' areas actually have been inhabited since long before European colonization, and where indigenous and extractivist inhabitants practise a sustainable kind of use of rivers and forests, the creation of parks has often had serious repercussions for people who in the process are displaced from their homelands. The land for them, as for the Mapuche and the Quechua, is part of their communities. Consequently the indigenous and extractivist inhabitants from Amazonia resist outside incursions through social environmental movements, which have been dubbed 'social ecologism' (Diegues, 2001, p. 165). Rubber-tappers, artisanal fishers and indigenous people have joined together in organizations which demand that they not be denied access to their traditional territories. In some places they have gone as far as to establish their own 'zoning' practices, requiring differential use of the lakes in their region (Diegues, 2001, p. 165). Their aim is to protect their communities, which they perceive as intertwined with their natural environments, so as to retain their physical/economic self-sufficiency and cultural autonomy, which likely would be threatened if they were forcibly moved outside their traditional territories.

This situation is comparable to that of diverse groups in Mexico. Situated in an area denuded of their millennial tropical forests in the state of Veracruz, where almost all land has been turned over to pasture and monocultures due to a misunderstood model of modernization, the Totonac people have provided researchers with a persuasive model of sustainability (Toledo, 1994). The Totonac perceive themselves as the guardians of the remaining islands of original rainforest in the area. They recently became known for a significant cultural revival, which has led to a strong reaffirmation of traditional values, all the while accompanied by the adoption of modern organizing strategies applied to achieve strengthened autodetermination for their community in the face of powerful integrative, state policies (aimed at depriving indigenous people of visibility as Native or autochthonous) (Wahrhaftig & Lane, 1995).

While achieving food and energy self-sufficiency and significant incomes, the Totonac multiple use approach to land also allows for the flourishing and use of 355 diverse species of plants, animals and mushrooms (Toledo, 1994). This shows that their traditional practices, supported by the will to resist new industrial approaches to land use (while, however, ready to adopt new techniques of social action), and a commitment to the autonomy of their community, can lead to a revitalization of both the human and the non-human parts of the community.

The implicit environmental ethic of care for the natural environment found in Totonac traditional practices is not an isolated case. This story is repeated many

times over among rural communities in Latin America. Especially impressive is the case of the Chimalapas, who, located in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, fight against powerful outside logging interests to maintain some of the last tropical forests in Mexico. Their aim similarly is to continue with their traditional way of life, which largely depends on the biological diversity only present in their native forest.¹⁵

Conclusion: The Role of Culture

Ethno-ecology points toward the importance of a kind of knowledge, that is, knowledge of the manner in which humanity and their natural environments may be integrated in sustainable ways. Social ecology argues for the necessity of resisting external domination of human communities and their natural spaces. Liberation/restorative ecology proposes that human beings and nature may come to fully flourish through the restoration of a qualitatively different relationship to each other. Ultimately, in Latin America spokespersons from the fields of ethno-ecology, social ecology and liberation/restorative ecology converge with the perspectives inherent in the practices of many (mostly Native) populations of Latin American societies, ranging from the Mapuche of southern Patagonia to the extractivists and Natives of Amazonia and the Totonac of Mexico. These populations insist on the importance of maintaining their cultural identities as members of particular communities which incorporate the natural environment, as well as their human beings, in an important way. They also realize the importance of strategies of resistance, and the urgency of acquiring and maintaining autonomy, in the face of the powerful modernizing and globalizing tendencies of late capitalism.

I believe that the theoretical approaches sampled, as well as the accounts of sustainable practices and belief systems drawn from Latin American populations, point to a model for the generation of sustainability that, through particular ways of living, also entails an implicit environmental ethic of care for the natural environment. The important insight to be gathered from this is that an ethic that effectively makes a contribution toward sustainability requires *embedding in viable ways of living that value the natural environment qua component of hybrid human-environmental communities*.¹⁶ One way to describe what is required for such ways of living, and for the concomitant environmental ethic of care, to flourish is to say that such communities are guided by certain, appropriate, cultural matrices.

In other words, on this view, sustainable ways of living are not determined simply by propitious physical or socio-economic conditions, nor are they the necessary result of personal commitment of individuals to nature-respectful ethical principles. Physical and socio-economic conditions are relevant factors, as is the presence of individuals with a definite will to act on a nature-respectful conception of morality, but neither may be sufficient in the presence of contemporary pressures from modernizing and globalizing forces. The working hypothesis that I obtain from this analysis is that *certain cultural matrices*, which guide everyday life and integrate nature and human beings in a community, are the *crucial conditions for sustainability*.¹⁷ In this sense, the approaches and cases from Latin America sampled point toward feasible models for the development of sustainability and appropriate environmental ethics also of relevance in our own Northern societies.

Notes

- ¹ Regarding the ethics of care see, for example, Plumwood (1995).
- ² In most parts of the world, including Latin America, indigenous people are the keepers of ethnoecological knowledge. Also see Heyd (1995). Gragson & Blount (1999, p. vii) say that 'ethnoecology is increasingly used as a cover term for natural history studies derived from local people', but then propose that 'ecology and ethnoecology can be defined in the broadest sense as the study of relationships between organisms and the totality of the physical, biological, and social factors they come into contact with' (p. vii).
- ³ Toledo explains that this perspective is based on a general principle of political ecology according to which 'contemporary society and nature suffer generalized processes of exploitation and deterioration [due to] the loss of control of human society over nature and itself' (Toledo, 1997, p. 237).
- ⁴ The idea of 'liberation ecology' resonates with Herbert Marcuse's idea (for example, Marcuse, 1972) that the time will come for the liberation of humanity *and* nature. Gómez Hinojosa (1990) directly uses the term 'liberating ecology' in the title of his article.
- ⁵ This perspective agrees nicely with Richard Peet and Michael Watts's notion of liberation ecology movements, which combines the concerns for environmental integrity with the concerns for 'livelihood, entitlements, and social justice' (Peet & Watts, 1996, p. 39).
- ⁶ Emphasis added. Boff is drawing a contrast between 'sustainable development', focussed on the continued generation of goods for human beings, and 'sustainability', conceived as a condition in which both human and non-human natural beings flourish. His usage contrasts with Toledo's, who supposes that 'community sustainable development' can bring about 'sustainability' understood in the sense I have proposed here.
- ⁷ The meaning of the terms 'modernization' and 'globalization' constitutes contested territory, of course. Suffice it to say that I understand by these terms certain approaches to the generation of goods for human beings that are dependent on a certain complex of techniques and tools such as capital, synthetic ingredients (such as pesticides and fertilizers), reliance on the demands of remote markets, introduction of exotic (even genetically modified) species, large-scale irrigation, absenteeist property management, etc.
- ⁸ Other principles listed by Toledo include diversity, equity and economic justice, as well as the integration of practices with landscape units and natural cycles.
- ⁹ They propose that, in the attempt to chart 'the shifting dialectic of nature-society relations, important new avenues were opened up for research and activism', which include 'analyses of how the capacity to manage resources could be constrained by the relations of production in which peasants were enmeshed, how particular forms of state subsidy stimulated the mining of the soil, or how local forms of knowledge could be harnessed in ecologically adaptive ways' (Peet & Watts, 1996, p. x).
- ¹⁰ For example, see McFall & Morales (2000), on the creation of the cultural identity of Mapuche people, and their strategies for protecting it.
- ¹¹ I am indebted to Barkin (2002) for ways of expressing these ideas here.
- ¹² See, for example, Centro de Documentación Mapuche.
- ¹³ This and all translations from Spanish are by myself (*Quienes son los hijos de la tierra: Los Mapuche*).
- ¹⁴ For a critique of development efforts in Amazonia see Morán (1993).
- ¹⁵ See Chimalapas Autonomía Indígena y Defensa de la Selva Zoque.
- ¹⁶ Also see Heyd (2004), which anticipates some of the material discussed here.
- ¹⁷ This points toward the importance of the exploration of what we may call 'cultures of nature', that is, patterns of thought and ways of acting that allow the inherent qualities of natural things to flourish. See Heyd (2005).

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