11 The search for an ethic of sustainable development in Latin America

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Latin America is a region of the world where the close relationship between predatory natural resource and development strategies is very clear. It is also a place where many of the oldest and some of the newest ideas which link ethical and environmental concerns are being developed. Latin America is illustrative of the failure of these ideas to take hold in the modern consciousness, but its failures signal the steps which must be taken in order to develop a new ethical understanding of sustainable development.

The value crisis in Latin America

Spanish colonization and domination of Latin America rested on the extraction of natural resources. Beginning in 1542, the bloody search for el dorado and mining of Potosí, Zacatecas, and Guanajuato sustained the Spanish crown and stimulated European development. Since then, the moral problem of natural resource management has been closely related to the moral problem of creating just relationships between persons and societies.

Drastic reductions of native populations accompanied the extraction of minerals, as the colonial economy made use of overt or covert slavery to grow. While the Spanish profited from the metallurgy and mining techniques of traditional aboriginal cultures, they otherwise regarded the natives as inferior, culturally backward, and unworthy of Christian salvation. Today it is recognized that aboriginal cultures had complex knowledge systems and used their vast natural resources wisely. The Maya developed agricultural techniques requiring a deep knowledge of forest structure and phenology. The Andean agricultural empires maintained complex civilizations on mountain slopes. Their ingenious constructions were based on a normative understanding of the relationship of humans to the land, which was conceived as sacred and living.

Amerindians could help a lot in developing sustainable development programmes, but today they are disappearing together with their forests. Most of the ethical wisdom and ecological knowledge of native peoples was lost during
European colonization. Western culture, now predominant in Latin America, has disseminated a different ethical attitude, and whatever remnants of aboriginal sensibility have surfaced in recent years, along with new concerns about environmental problems, have done so within a climate dominated by Western neoclassical economic theory.

In this dominant 'market' paradigm the good life is obtained by the buying of commodities; the environment is fragmented; its holistic properties are ignored; and the costs of environmental disruption are externalized.

In Latin America this paradigm has resulted in a generalized development style that, since World War II, has been related to peripheric capitalism, and is directed toward increased industrialization. Nevertheless, two development systems may be recognized: capitalist and socialist. Although their objectives are different, environmental problems transcend this dichotomy.

Whether originating from the left or right, the reigning development style is anthropocentric in the worse sense. It exalts success and production, views nature as humanity's servant and without rights, assumes that growth should be maintained at any price, and that technological progress is both end and means of social, political, and cultural life. It acknowledges no material obstacles to development, in part because Latin America is imagined as an enormous region with unlimited resources and large distress buffer capacities. Finally, all factors and data that reveal the potentially dangerous consequences of these attitudes are minimized or ignored. Under this paradigm, underdevelopment has been conceived as something humiliating, and all efforts are directed to reaching the development level of highly industrialized and urbanized countries. Development is a race and to lag behind is to die.

With regard to the relationship of science and ethics, this development paradigm presents the following characteristics: ethical values are separate from science; scientists do not evaluate the moral context of their actions; there is an absence of ethical judgments regarding development and its consequences; and the initial scientific question of how the universe can be understood is transformed to the question of how the universe can be dominated. Paradoxically, some of these characteristics are also found in some of the so-called 'alternative' technological strategies, and it is difficult to imagine that alternative technologies alone would be enough to transform present society.

These postures are accepted uncritically and are not subject to discussion at all levels. Thus they approach Kuhn's concept of a paradigm. This development paradigm has ancient roots, and is deeply implanted in present day culture. It is supported by non-rational feelings. H.C.F. Mansilla developed the concept of 'collective pre-conscious' for this non-rational paradigm, and referred to its origin in cultures of the centre. As the anthropological studies of D. Ribeiro show, many Latin American cultural groups, including ruling elites in most countries, can be understood as 'transplanted nations'. They have resulted from the expansion of European nations and follow their 'mother' ideology. In these groups are found the non-rational bases of the present development paradigm.

The ethical issues of sustainable development

Sustainable development has been one of the primary purposes of environmental groups and governments in Latin America trying to change the present non-rational development paradigm. Sustainable development emerged on the continent during the mid-1970s along with the new concepts of 'development styles', 'ecodevelopment', and 'alternative development'. Many of these ideas originated from work in the area itself, notably by the Centro del Desarrollo (CENDES), Venezuela, and the Economic Commission for Latin America (CEPAL).

Various attempts to define the meaning of sustainable development have disclosed a series of moral conflicts. Beneath varied definitions of the meaning of the term itself lie questions concerning the nature and end of growth, the desirability of industrialization, the stance to take on population reduction, and questions related to the place of environmental problems in social and political arenas.

Authors use the term 'sustainable development' in different ways, and no theoretical body of thought yet exists to stabilize the term. The World Conservation Strategy (WCS) defined sustainable development as 'the modification of the biosphere and the application of human, financial, living and non-living resources to satisfy human needs and improve the quality of human life'. The WCS definition is invoked by mainline conservationist groups including the Brazilian Association for the Conservation of Nature; the Fundacion Vida Silvestre, Argentina; and Natura, Ecuador.

No mention is made in this definition of either economic or social growth. However, the WCS has been perceived as a complement of the United Nations International Development Strategy, and the latter does look for economic and social growth. A.W. Clausen, president of the World Bank, states that sustainable development must allow for continued economic growth, especially in the Third World. Clausen stresses that poverty imposes strains on the natural environment, and that at survival levels people exploit their environment too intensively. I attach much significance to this position, as it reflects the posture of a large financial agency related to development aid in Latin America.

Along with the question of growth comes the question of how much, if any, industrialization is needed for sustainable development. It has been observed by Mansilla, among others, that most Latin American groups have not adequately dealt with the validity of the need for industrialization. A non-rational position with regard to the need for industrialization and growth has often been maintained by groups critical of the dominant development paradigm. For example, Brazilian delegates voted for United Nations Resolution 2849 (a resolution the United States and United Kingdom voted against) which condemned the industrial countries for contaminating the world, yet Brazil also supported (but soon abandoned) development 'at any price'.

The ethics of population growth is a major source of disagreement within the concept of sustainable development. The WCS does not mention population growth, although it is considered in a major recent paper on sustainable development by the Global Tomorrow Coalition in North America. The Global Tomorrow Coalition's executive statement reads: 'In many nations, rapid population growth is already exciting unsustainable processes on the resource base and frustrating efforts to meet human needs.' The ideology of industrial development and the theory of Latin American dependence both oppose any
population decrease. Many Latin Americans consider high population figures as a way to reach an industrialized state. M. Max-Neef's concept of 'ecological person' or 'eco-son', which measures the resources needed by a person in order to attain a good quality of life, is relevant here. Because a person from an industrialized country requires far more resources than a person from a poor one, it follows that reduction in population growth in Latin America should be accompanied by a reduction of consumption levels in the First World.

Probably the most relevant moral issue has to do with the reconception of environmental problems as social problems. At the time of the Stockholm conference, delegates from less developed countries stressed that 'environment' includes human beings, human artefacts, and, indeed, society itself. This implies the ethical position stated by Josué de Castro, among others, that poverty is the major environmental problem in Latin America. But there is pollution due to industrialization and there is pollution due to extreme poverty. Both must be recognized. Recent examples of concern for the social dimension of environmental problems include Rodriguez Arana's 1986 report on environmental disruptions in Guatemala; the 1987 report by the newly founded Central American Environmental NGOs Network for Sustainable Development; Nicaragua's environmental programmes accompanied by educational support; and even the paradox of CEPAL, which from an initial strictly economics posture, moved first to the social, and then to the environmental dimension.

The recent meeting of United Nations Environment Programme's government representatives on environmental problems in Latin America and the Caribbean (April 1987) pointed out the relationship of economic and social issues to environmental policy and concluded that foreign debt pressures in some countries threaten the environment and quality of life of its people, and that wars have severe repercussions on the environment — a clear reference to Central American conflicts. Peace is being considered an essential condition for quality of life and environment. Pérez points out that in El Salvador's civil war the intensive bombing and use of chemicals have drastically affected not only human beings, but also soils, forests, and wildlife.

Another example of how environmental problems are rooted in problems of social morality comes from rural development in tropical forests. Small peasant landowners have been blamed for environmental disruption which has resulted in the loss of extensive areas of tropical forests and the extinction of many species. Many of these sell their products to transnational agriindustrial companies; others pursue exploitative techniques as an inevitable result of their small size lands. Land ownership is the complex result of historical and socioeconomic conditions. Present inequalities in land access are supported by governments ranging from dictatorships following 'national security' ethics to democracies. Any ecologist dealing with environmental disruption in Latin America will have to deal with this social-ethical dimension of the problem.

Movements for sustainable development

One source of dissatisfaction with the dominant development paradigm originated in concern for Latin America's environmental problems. Workers in several fields — biologists, naturalists, wildlifers, public health service workers — with poor knowledge of each other, and with little interest at first in economic and social problems, initiated activities in the environmental field. The Latin Americans who contributed to Only One Earth, the 1972 Ward and Dubos' report, were primarily concerned with exhausting natural resources, the need to slow population increase, and the problems of waste management, points much influenced by the first Club of Rome report.

Environmental concern led to discontent with existing development pathways and the discovery of the social dimensions of environmental problems. Discontent grew very quickly in the late 1960s and still with limited connection among those involved. Then in 1975 criticism of development concepts reached its highest point with, on the one hand, a search for a new theoretical background, and on the other, an acknowledgment of an ethical crisis.

I have identified two main scenarios within the Latin American environmental movement, which is surely an oversimplification, but perhaps useful for analysing the steps now taking place toward sustainable development. One scenario is made up of 'environmental managers', who look for better management of present day development, and who hope to reduce environmental disruption to a minimum. Their approach is that of technicians with short-term policies. They do not present different ethical principles nor do they question present ones. I include in this category both ecocapitalists and ecocosocialists.

However, in the present climate, even environmental management groups have been invaded by the search for 'another development'. One of the leading voices has been that of CEPAL. Osvaldo Sunkel, for example, exemplifies the changing posture of Latin American economists searching for a new development which includes the environmental dimension. He has called for a range of changes in energy consumption which includes suggestions for new administrative systems based on decentralization and local community autonomy.

It must be pointed out that management groups are doing a most important job, ranging from public education to the ownership of protected areas. Most of these efforts are done by foundations and associations closely related to middle and upper social classes, with representation in both private and state areas, and thus with economic possibilities to develop important projects. Their actions will not change the dominant development paradigm, but they provide indispensable aid in some areas of environmental problems.

A second scenario is composed of 'antihegemonic' groups, mostly small and diverse movements at the grassroots level, with a deep but poorly elaborated ethical concern. They share a common questioning of the development paradigm itself, and a great concern to accompany their ethical premises with their everyday practice. They include diverse groups ranging from Latin American minority groups (anarchists and feminists) to Catholic grassroots groups and others fighting for structural change.

The countries of Latin America with extensive industrial development present the most diverse range of groups. Brazil is a good example. Early concern in Brazil was clearly directed to its exuberant wildlife, and the leading voice was the Brazilian Association for the Conservation of Nature. Since the 1970s, the environmental issue has broadened. The Brazilian environmental groups have
been concerned with large dam projects, intensive industrial complexes such as Tucurui, and the nuclear agreement with the Federal Republic of Germany, which has led them to enter the social field. Leading voices include both natural and social scientists, backed by an explosive growth in non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The southern Brazil NGO, AGAPAN, has directed intense public campaigns aimed at social transformation at every level — attack today and ever, at the small and large scale, defending life. Since the early 1980s several persons have entered the political field and state green parties have been founded.

Venezuela also has many distinct environmental groups, many important institutions working in the environmental area, a national network (FORJA), and also a large official body (Ministry of the Environment) where the state plays the role of protagonist. Surprisingly, the best expression of the political dimension is found in an alternative labour union movement, the 'R-cause' movement, which is searching for a new paradigm for a better quality of life.

'Ecodevelopment' has been actively promoted in Latin America by I. Sachs. Although still a limited movement in Latin America, ecodesvelopment seeks to link the environmental managers with the antigonecic groups. First presented as a development strategy to avoid economic growth and depletive natural resources, ecodesvelopment is also part of an ethical movement stressing the development of the human being over material objectives. It supports the recreation of locally-based communities with better utilization of resources specific to ecosystems, increasing the quality of life through the satisfaction of basic human needs, appropriate technology, and solidarity with future generations. Human beings are recognized as the most valued resource, and ecodesvelopment is a contribution to their fulfillment. This implies horizontal authority and decision-making, and requires a new education to change the attitude of dominance over nature, or, in the case of some aboriginal groups, to preserve and reinforce a respectful attitude towards nature.

One of the most notorious absences at the beginning of the environmental movement was the Catholic Church. It is noteworthy that most of the early environmentalists in Latin America were secular people who found in the environmental movement an alternative or complement to their religious faiths. Since the Medellin meeting, the Church has moved towards a greater concern with social problems. And within this current concern with social problems there seems to be emerging a concern for the ethics of the environment. Theology of liberation was born of a consciousness of dependence and oppression. While traditional theology is non-historical, theology of liberation is a practice that looks for a change in the historical process, particularly one affecting the poorest and most oppressed. Thus its perspective has no particular theoretical context, but proceeds from an analysis of reality with a particular criticism of the dependent capitalist of Latin America. Today environmental issues are being examined from the standpoint of liberation theology. J. Peixoto in Uruguay links human rights and ecological rights and compares the domination of human over human to the domination of human over nature. Borinda in Brazil speaks in a parable of paper-gathering in Buenos Aires about the Third World dying as a result of being fed technological debris from the First World, debris which is part of the system of domination.

Franciscans have long been associated with an environmental perspective. In an early paper, L. Boff suggests that a way of recovering from the environmental crisis is through a recovery of Franciscan spirituality. He recognizes two existential life categories: the present way of being-above-things; and the ancient (and hopefully future) way of being-with-things. Boff suggests that the solution to our present problems lies not in specific measures but in a return to a mystic relation with nature.

Other Christian writers deal with the necessity of human stewardship for nature. J.C.R. de la Peña favours anthropocentric ethics over "natural-animal" ethics. God has not authorized the pillage of nature, but requires human beings to manage creation. In the same way, Pope John Paul II, in his first 1979 encyclical, stated that the environment must be the object of wise management. These postures do not acknowledge, as do Boff and the Franciscans, intrinsic values in other living beings and nature. Thus, they are only revisions of traditional anthropocentric perspectives.

Today, environmental religious postures continue to diversify. Recently the Episcopal Conference of the Dominican Republic presented a pastoral letter on environmental relations. It refers to soils, forests and fauna and to the inadmissible inequalities of land access, wealth, and wasteful consumption of natural resources by the rich. The letter asks for an ecological catechism and for religious celebrations of natural events.

Prospects for an ethic of sustainable development

My initial conclusions are pessimistic. I must confess that whichever postures are considered, the morally committed environmental movement in Latin America is limited. We are still a minority and a divided force.

Since the 1970s, there have been a series of declarations and reports about the need for sustainable development, mostly by qualified scientists, — but the environmental situation has not improved, and is in fact worse in many respects. This discourse has been particularly impelled by NGOs. But it is of interest to note that many Latin American governments have also reproduced it while continuing with their exploitative tactics and growth-mania strategies.

While international and national groups call for a new ethics and drastic changes, in the actual world the situation remains unchanged. The reports mentioned are more or less diffuse requests for "another development" to bring about the wise use of the environment. They can be named "committee utopias". In action they have been little more than passive voices, unable to show the path to transform our societies.

Thus, it turns out that neither the enthusiastic denunciations by NGOs, nor the quiet declarations by governmental agencies, have gone beyond solving a few particular problems. In this situation, countries with environmental management policies should be considered but one step beyond countries with no policies at all. We are at the level of diagnosing disease symptoms, far away from recovery. The 1970s have passed away, and many opportunities for change are gone. Even in countries that reached high industrialization in those years, like Mexico and Brazil, the final result seems to be higher poverty levels for the
majority at the cost of greater environmental impact. Furthermore, we lost confidence in social scientists, for they were not only unable to promote actual changes but also unable to foresee the present multidimensional crisis.

Some conceive the core of these problems to be in the exploitation of majorities by some minorities, in both socialist and capitalist countries. But this is still an incomplete approach, as similar hierarchical situations are reproduced within most social groups, even among the poorest. The actual problem is the logic of domination shared by most of us, the domination of one person over the other, and of human beings over nature. This logic is firmly rooted in our spirits, and is of ancient origin.

If we are actually working for a change we must develop a new ethical setting. We know that in this century utopia is materially possible, but the challenge is to promote deep moral changes that reach and modify the roots of our hierarchical behaviour. NGOs are being asked to participate actively in a change that would be so drastic that we would hardly recognize even these organizations in the future. The challenge is to go one step further than just another committee utopia. I can advance some points in this path.

First, and most basic, we must change our position from an anthropocentric to a biocentric posture by avoiding all hierarchical postures, by being-with-things, and not above things. To achieve a holistic perspective on the world, we need to acknowledge the tight ecological relationships between all living and non-living elements, and to recognize that all living beings and living systems have the right to fulfillment. Each living being, either animal or plant, possesses rights, and thus the living system also has rights. We should understand that any action taken will strengthen or weaken the health of the ecosystem. In other words, we should seek to maintain synergy in the ecosystem, and to extend it to human social groupings and all human-environment relations.

Second, this change is only possible through freedom, democratic practice, and a new social order. Nature and humanity will be liberated together or not at all, for every step in environmental destruction has the effect of increasing social injustice, and every act of social injustice has the effect of increasing environmental destruction.

In Latin America, Mallmann and Max-Neef, continuing the work of North American Abraham Maslow, provide important clues for a humanistic basis of an ethical alternative development paradigm. According to these thinkers, the creation of 'development on a human scale' depends upon the following premises: development should refer to persons, not objects; the best development process permits an increase in the quality of life of persons; quality of life depends on adequately satisfying human needs; human needs constitute a finite (contra Maslow) non-hierarchical system, and are satisfied through 'satisfiers'. There are no 'basic needs' since all needs are important and at the same level. M. Hopenhayn shows that in the strict sense needs are not satisfied (which implies a lack), but are lived, as they are at the same time a lack and a search of the self.25 Human needs are the same in all cultures and in all times; the satisfiers change from culture to culture and time to time.

C.A. Mallmann has shown the relationship between human needs, satisfiers and alternative development by replacing the concept of developed and underdeveloped societies with the concept of eutopic and dystopic societies.

Distopic societies are equitable in their distribution of satisfiers but still do not promote a high quality of life. This is seen in advanced industrial societies where most satisfiers are distributed in the same way and in much the same amounts for the mass of persons. Yet different persons need different satisfiers to meet the same need. A uniformity of satisfiers implies a uniformity of wishes, which is not true.

In eutopic societies, it is the satisfaction of needs that is equitable. There each person receives the particular satisfiers that he or she uniquely needs, and everyone reaches their personal goals in such a way as to reinforce the goals of the society as a whole; there is an ecological or synergistic relationship between persons and with the environment. This requires free access to the necessary satisfiers at all three levels of basic human need (psychosomatic, psychosocial, and extra-human or environmental) and open participation at all levels of communal decision-making. A high quality of life is attained when all these relationships work together.

Third, to reach the deep roots of our ethical beliefs we must develop a new education and a new science to nurture it. It must be recognized that:

- there cannot be an environmental study without an interrelated social study — social and natural sciences cannot be separated;
- the vital facts are processes and not static relationships — study of the historical components of human and natural systems should be reciprocal;
- scientific work also requires social work that promotes good human-environment relations;
- Social-environmental work is with the people, and not for the people.

This direction rejects one-way techniques which in the past have been mostly sustained by scientists and technicians who 'tell' the common people what must be done. It recovers co-participative work. The objective is to share common people perceptions and knowledge of the world, and recognize their problems, which most of the time are not identical with scientific inquiry. Present day dialogue between local communities and technicians is poor, the former being mere recipients of information by the latter. This must be changed to shared participative research where all learn.

Modern development is entangled in an ideological web. Not only environmentalists, but other social thinkers as well, have protested the dominant cultural ideology. The guidelines offered here for a moral vision of sustainable development should help further expose this underlying ideology. But once we acknowledge that this is the situation, we can no longer hope to produce a new kind of development by responding to issues on a fragmented basis. We must go back to the roots of the ideology and produce a new one. This is possible only through a deeper ethical analysis — a deep ethics — that can give birth to such new thinking.

I contrast deep ethics to present day ethics, which seems more a consequence of the dominant ideology than a challenge to it, and is largely irrelevant to science, economics, and politics. If deep ethics were the primary source of thinking and action, development would be conceived as a process of continued satisfaction of human needs at all levels. Before any action, we would ask
ourselves how this act would affect ourselves, other humans, and other living beings. Deep ethics requires a new paradigm of freedom and calls for a new model of development. As a fundamental, inclusive ethical concept, freedom is not only a personal reality, something achieved by the individual, but also a collective reality. Individual fulfillment is possible only within the context of social fulfillment. But freedom is still more than this, as it also includes an environmental dimension. There can be no true freedom where domination over nature entails the domination of our interior nature and the nature of other human beings. We must face the challenge of responsibly building a new history, one that empowers humans and other living things together.

Notes

9. Mansilla, 'Metas de desarrollo y problemas ecológicos en América Latina'.
12. Red Regional de Organizaciones Conservacionistas no Gubernamentales para el desarrollo sostenido de Centro América (REDES), Declaración de los participantes a la primera Conferencia Centroamericana de Acción Ambiental (Managua, Nicaragua: REDES, 1987); G. Rodríguez Arana, La interacción de los sistemas y el deterioro ambiental en Guatemala (Guatemala: APROMAM, 1986).
20. C. A. Mallmann, Calidad de vida y desarrollo (Santiago, Chile: Instituto Chileno de Estudios Humanísticos, 1977); Max-Neef, Economía descalza.