

## **Workshop: Environmental Justice, Ecological Debt and Sustainability**

### **Opening page**

Over the last few years, two fundamental concepts have renewed the debate about the transition toward sustainability, and thus allowing for greater correspondence between the social and environmental movements. Even though these concepts of environmental justice and ecological debt did not originate in academic circles, intellectuals and researchers alike have also begun to incorporate and develop these principles.

The concept of environmental justice emerged from the Black Power Movement in the United States. Informed by their experiences in the civil rights battles of the 60s, organized defense groups of people of color began to notice at first intuitively and then later more systematically that the most polluting and environmentally damaging were very deliberately distributed, being concentrated in predominantly Black, Native, and Latino regions and neighborhoods. Such "environmental racism" illustrated the correlation between social and environmental inequality, causing the most marginalized sectors of society to receive a disproportionate share of the environmental impact created by the socio-economic system. Although it was the dominant classes that were largely responsible for this impact through their unsustainable consumption and production patterns, they were protected from the degradation by intentionally targeting its effects to the collective space and those areas occupied by the non Anglo-Saxon sectors of society.

The conceptual innovation consisted in framing the environmental debate in terms of rights and justice and not solely in terms of conservation. The central premise was that all people are equally entitled to a healthy environment, and that, from a socio-economic point of view, any structure or process that deliberately targeted the most disadvantaged populations for environmental risk and degradation was unfair. Such degradation, where unavoidable, should be distributed equally through all sectors of society. In this way, the movement against environmental destruction and degradation evolved and began to be considered an arena for the struggle for democracy and the affirming of universal human rights.

### **Environmental Justice, Condition of Socio-Environmental Sustainability**

Although the concept of environmental justice originated in the United States, it has been appropriated and redefined by social movements all around the planet. It has an extraordinary potential for politically renewing environmentalism and making it more relevant to the struggle for social transformation. For example, in Latin America, despite the pronounced evidence of environmental racism (especially in the form of discrimination against indigenous and Afro-descendant communities), the issue has centered on the defense of impoverished populations against systemic environmental inequities. The fight for environmental justice, on the other hand, has transcended efforts for mere defense, and acquired a much more proactive character. Not only must the poor majority of the population be protected against the selective advance of degradation, but also, more positively, they have the right to enjoy equal access to the environment and its natural resources via an equitable and democratic distribution of clean water, arable land, clean air, biodiversity, etc. Struggles for agrarian and urban reform, for the promotion of a "policy of dignity" (which implies, for example, a basic basket of water, energy, and green spaces) as opposed to the indulgent, technocratic vision

that informs the "policy of impoverishment," the fight to defend the collective space against the encroachment of privatization: all these efforts gain a much more explicit and coherent environmental context. The defense of the environment has acquired much stronger social implications.

### **Ecological debt and development**

The concept of ecological debt was launched by the Latin American environmental movement of the 80's as a way of critiquing the economicist and deceptive nature of the discussion around the "financial debt." The basic idea was that the marginalization of humanity that was happening in terms of consumption and the degradation of Earth's natural resources (with a minority of 20% consuming over 80% of these resources and consequently producing 80% of the environmental impact) could not be treated independently of the ecological inequalities inherent in and developed by the global systems of the last few centuries. The same minority of high consumers, concentrated in countries whose financial institutions are the financial debt creditors, are the same ecological debtors vis à vis the rest of the world's population. This explanation for this has two components. Firstly, the majority of this inequity is the historical result of colonialism and imperialism, which generated a legacy of disproportionate consumption of the Earth's human and natural resources in favor of certain regions and at the detriment of others. In and of itself, this liability already constitutes a debt, even though its details are not easily mathematically demonstrated.

Secondly, the disparity of consumption patterns in the current context results in a small part of the population occupying a disproportional amount of the planet's environmental space, producing, for example, the global warming which threatens the rest of the human population, especially the poorest sectors who are most dependent on direct access to the ecosystem. In this sense, the ecological debt is not only a legacy from the past but more importantly, an ethical deficiency that expands daily.

It is not difficult to perceive the political potential of the alliance of these two concepts. Actually, the ecological debt is created by the effects of preserving an unjust global environmental situation, where a minority has appropriated the majority of the Earth's resources and exports the consequences of planetary degradation to the poor majority of humankind. On another front, situations of environmental injustice at the global and national levels generate internal and international ecological debts which must then be paid off socially. To put it in another way: the concept of environmental injustice critically diagnoses the roots of contemporary environmental unsustainability at its various levels and ties it to the over-consumption caused by the unfair and disproportionate appropriation of the basic materials for survival. On the other hand, the concept of ecological debt, postulates the ethical imperative that this injustice must be faced and overcome, given that it is only the payment of that political and moral debt that will enable supporting a human development in every region of the planet that is just, balanced, beneficial and sustainable. Global unsustainability is thus confronted by promoting environmental justice and the political (rather than monetary) repayment of the ecological debt.

It is only by equitably redistributing the planet's resources that it will be possible to avoid the over-consumption of a minority, which is the greatest factor of global degradation. It is essential to identify patterns of consumption and production that are environmentally sustainable and appropriate to the balanced and equitable development of humanity as a whole (and here the topics coincide with those of the Workshop on Ethical Consumption).

This ethical guideline could work as a great incentive to promote sustainable technologies and practices, given that the disproportional consumption by the elite has been the great stimulus for technological promotion and for destructive and irresponsible production patterns. As Gandhi said, "The Earth provides enough to satisfy every man's need, but not every man's greed."

### **Workshop's Proposal**

The workshop proposes that the WSES of the Alliance become involved in this critical debate concerning the conceptual renovation of the ecological movement, promote specific activities and studies about the political potential and application of these two concepts, and establish cooperation agreements with the international and national organizations and networks that are focusing on these new approaches.

Potential counterparts for this effort could be the Southern People's Ecological Debt Creditors Alliance, formed in Prague in 2000 and coordinated by Ecuador's Acción Ecológica (Ecological Action) as well as other environmental justice networks. For example, there is the Brazilian Network of Environmental Justice. On the other hand, North American networks, efficiently organized and based in the universities and institutions of the Black Power Movement, are well positioned and available to support global justice and confront the North-South imbalance. Such is the case with the Global Climate Justice movement.