

9/12/2021

Social Justice/Eco-Justice:

Thinking and Acting from Nature (Part III)

John Clammer

The importance of diversity to sustainability is hopefully now well established. The immense and unknown risks to the health of the entire eco-sphere with the loss and destruction of species and habitats is now belatedly recognized, even as the destruction of those habitats continues in the name of economic growth and “development”. The loss of cultural diversity is equally important, not only because of the inherent delight in the variety of cultural and artistic expressions, but also because cultures embody knowledge. With the loss of every indigenous culture or language so the knowledge of ecological systems, healing methods, kinship systems and relational possibilities, and alternative ways of conceiving of the cosmos are lost and can never be regained. The destruction of species and the destruction of cultures together diminish the diversity on which the web of life depends. Manuela Carneiro de Cunha has illustrated this very well with her study of the ways in which traditional peoples’ agricultural practices actively promote diversity, even though it is not clear on “rational” grounds why so much variety is “necessary”. In purely “economic” terms it does not, but in a larger bio-social and even cosmological framework it most certainly does: such practices preserve the web, the dimensions and interrelationships of which even our best science has never unraveled, and almost certainly never will.

These thoughts may seem to be just that – ideas – until it is recognized that when put into practice they are radical in their consequences and transformative power. This is where we pass from aspiration to effect. It will also be noted that these have little to do with politics in the traditional and institutional sense including the seeking of power. The real revolution is much more subtle, and also far more far reaching in its effects. Here we are speaking of something closer to what Arturo Escobar calls “political ontology”, closely aligned with his idea of “sustaining the pluriverse”. The “pluriverse” is another way of talking about diversity, but converting it into political terms – a move from political ecology to political ontology, the latter referring to forms of politics that is post-dualist, overcoming the separations of culture/nature, human/non-human, subject/object, mind/body, and so forth, and which promote alternative ways of being. Or as Escobar puts it “In short, it calls on us *to re-learn to walk the world as living beings*. This is the imaginary that feminist and decolonial political ontologies are attempting to build, as practiced spaces for understanding and healing, and as pluriversal pedagogies for re-weaving co-creating worlds with others”. The natural world is in a sense a given, and as such sets the boundaries for human action, including the political and the economic. But the political, social and cultural worlds are not given: they are created by us and can be changed, or “co-created”. The life-world is in fact our greatest work of art, so to make it just and beautiful should be our highest calling.

But while the natural may be given and the socio-political not, they are of course deeply interconnected and indeed, ultimately aspects of each other. This is why ecology is political: we cannot live outside of nature and our relationship to it is not in fact an “external” one at all: we live in nature and nature lives in us. If we violate the “rules” of that nature we will suffer, and our society and economy will be deeply impacted. This, surely, is one of the key lessons of the Covid-19 pandemic, but also, beyond the tragedies that it has brought to so many, its positive lesson: we must change, and change in ways that at all levels, including the economic, the political and the cultural, cooperate with the universe and do not work against it, for it is larger than us and will always in the end win out.

Eco-Justice/Social Justice

Historically the sphere of law has been entirely separate from that of nature. This situation has slowly changed with the emergence of areas such as environmental law, the growing push to recognize the rights of animals and perhaps of nature as a whole and the embodiment of such principles is the constitutions of states or of provinces of larger states, and the perception that human law cannot simply float free of natural factors, but if human society is embedded in nature, then so must legal systems be entwined with the environment. But much creative work needs to be done in this area: much so-called environmental law is still to do essentially with property rights, access to protected sites including forests and similar all-too-human preoccupations. This is clearly not enough if what Cullinan calls “Earth Justice” is to be achieved in which not just the protection but the enhancement of the planet is the goal and where there is

a seamless connection between ecological justice - the protection of nature from destruction and unsustainable exploitation – and social justice, the latter being understood as not just protection from the same kinds of forces that damage nature, but as actively creating the kinds of environment in which human flourishing can be maximized and human potential given full rein, and any forces that work against this rejected and diminished. This again touches on the question of sustainable futures, but, as noted above, mechanical and managerial approaches to sustainability are part of the problem, not the solution. This is reflected in the language often used. In climate change discourse it is common to hear talk of “adaptation and mitigation” – living with the problem that we have ourselves caused, rather like a co-dependent relationship with a violent partner – rather than a transformative language of possibilities and shaping the future at a unique historical juncture when many forces have converged to demand change, when the world is full of creative ideas about alternative futures, and when objective forces, including climate change, loss of biodiversity, and pandemic have made it clear that business as usual is over. In this scenario it is not so much that we seek change, but that change has been thrust upon us. The crucial issue is what to do with this opportunity, the alternative to which is at worst self-destruction, and at best an ecologically degraded and almost certainly violent planet of shrinking civilizational possibilities, and one in which nature and the remarkable animal species with which we share this unique planet will suffer with us in a world not of their making.

Justice imposed from the outside is always coercive. True justice should arise from the sense of a true relationship with others around us and with the larger eco-sphere. This is partly a philosophical question of getting our categories right – the “rectification of names” of which ancient Chinese philosophy spoke, and then of translating that clear perception into action, but action of a new kind: never violent and never coercive and in some ways close to the old Taoist idea of “not doing”. But this not doing is of a special kind – not passive, but active cooperation with the deep grammar of reality, most clearly signaled to us by nature itself. This involves active listening to what the Earth is telling us, action defined as positive and energetic cooperation with those messages, the imagination to conceive of alternatives in all spheres of life to the destructive and alienating forces that we see currently indeed changing the world, but against its grain, the willingness to build economies of solidarity rather than of competition and waste, and the courage to engage in new forms of politics. This is exactly the ‘Great Work’ of which the eco-theologian Thomas Berry spoke, and it is hard to think of a greater human adventure or vocation than participating in that work, one of the few genuinely non-alienating forms of labor and one that in linking our small individual selves to the “Great Self” of the universe provides a deep satisfaction unobtainable by any other means.

John Clammer is a consulting editor of Meeting Rivers. He is presently Professor of Sociology and Professorial Fellow at the Institute for Environment and Sustainability at O.P.Jindal Global University, Delhi, India. Before moving to India John was Director of International Courses at the United Nations University in Tokyo. He is the author of several books and many papers related to culture, ecology and sustainability