



## Greening up Politics, or the debate on environmental sustainability.

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### Introduction

We consider that the Environmental Crisis, as a Civilizing Crisis, is related to the way of learning and gaining access to new knowledge. Therefore, we argue that teaching must pave the way for the University to open the appropriate space to encourage debate, reflection, to learn about this crisis and the alternatives to tackle it.

Therefore, through the present work, we are keen on sharing the experience undertaken in different areas considered vulnerable to the environmental issue, which also have been included for years in the curricula of Political Science and International Relations College at

To begin with, we can mention the seminar first called "*Environmental Knowledge and Greening up Politics*". For the current cohorts the name was changed to "*Politics and Society in Latin America: A proposal to analyze it from the Environmental Thinking*". This has sparked a worthwhile exchange of teachers from different disciplines, which, in the framework of the Latin American Environmental Thinking, has encouraged populous encounters of students, not only from our College but from the whole University.

Another seminar, in this case extracurricular, was the open lecture "*Native Peoples' Knowledge, Beliefs and Struggle*", inaugurated in 2009 and its reunions/classes have the singularity of being featured/lectured by representatives of native peoples from our country. We firmly believe that this intercultural spirit has created a lively atmosphere for the *Exchange of Knowledge*, which is necessary in order to reach an *Environmental Epistemology*.

As participants in some way or another, we hold that from such educational practices and interactions we have succeeded in clarifying and questioning knowledge stuck to the dogmatisms of the "Unsustainable Modernity". The latter standpoint has always been functional to the manufacturing imperative of the market.

## Chronicle of a Challenge

By 2010, here at the College of Political Science and International Relations at Rosario National University, we started to design and share spaces favoring Environmental Knowledge and Education <sup>(1)</sup> as a gesture of defiance of the reductionist vision of education, plagued of tenets of classical and mechanistic science.

This gave way to the creation of the optional curricular seminar "*Environmental Knowledge and Greening up Politics*", a space that gathered teachers from diverse disciplines (philosophy, politics, sociology, geography, history, medicine, among others) along with undergraduate students, mostly from our college <sup>(2)</sup> and also coming from other colleges. This seminar had two cohorts and both registered a significant attendance. From 2012, following the same epistemological approach, a new seminar was created, called "*Politics and Society in Latin America: A proposal to analyze it from the Environmental Thinking*", which was carried out during the first term.

It is our duty as university teachers and researchers to call for an urgent and necessary "discussion about knowledge" on this new field of education. We were able to question knowledge considered indisputable, to demand a more complex interaction among the different disciplines, to come up with an innovative educational practice and to review the political analysis, in the light of the "Environmental Paradigm".

In the framework of the current environmental issues, we are convinced that fostering these discussions on environmental politics will be a step forward for our institution. We hope to continue to renew our social commitment for many years to come. From our curricular standpoint we think over the *civilizing crisis* we are facing right here, in the place where we live. Here, many conflicting visions arise as a result of cultural diversity. Thus, from the metropolitan area of Rosario, the region of water, we focus the debate on two concepts: sustainability and a complex environmental policy. The former is based on recognizing the limits and potential of nature. The latter arises from a new conception of the world, a conception we want to strengthen, as it is vital to cope with the challenges the third millennium poses. It is clear for us that hegemonic knowledge is unsustainable, because a linear reductionist view prevails on it. This conception has led to the worshipping of unlimited development, utilitarianism and overuse of Mother Earth, along with the exploitation of men and women for the sake of achieving a long-awaited "progress".

As Carlos Galano pointed out <sup>(2008)</sup>, this way of thinking and acquiring knowledge has stripped nature from its original and experiential meaning. The aim is to leave nature stranded from societal life in the name of achieving a never-ending productivism; thinking about nature in terms of "countable" resources, which are reviewed through statistics and cold indicators. This is the job of people unaware –or unconcerned– of environmental issues. Even with the so-called prosperity of the Welfare State –which indeed brought about some positive effects for society in terms of economy, education and political and social rights– the ruling economic growth policies split off from nature, consolidating the empty and undisputable speech of mechanistic "Unsustainable Modernity".

Facing this unidirectional way of conceiving science, in our seminar we deepen the questioning/deconstruction of concepts used by the dominant language. Our intent is to reflect upon politics as chained to positive law and its two pillars: private property and individualism. These have tamed nature and denied the cultural diversity of our peoples.

So we have opened a space for a *dialogue of knowledge* and of *intercultural interrelations*, which enables a new praxis. Our goal is to reconsider the future of the country and the "lifeworlds" but from a stance of participative democracy, sustainability and environmental justice –without these, social justice is impossible to reach.

## Articulation with the Open Lecture

We believe that environmental knowledge arises from a new ethics and epistemology; skills are merged, values are set and knowledge is internalized. Thus, we are able to question ecological conditions of sustainability and the social grounds of democracy and justice. Therefore, two important aspects can be challenged: strategies for power and the effects of domination caused by the different ways in which knowledge can be stopped, appropriated and conveyed (Leff 2000).

It is only by the re-appropriation of nature and subalternized knowledge that we can re-develop local and identity backgrounds, denied and denigrated by colonialism: this way, we can draw alternatives to market globalization. Reflecting upon this conception means beginning to dismantle the device which made the exclusion of nature commonplace, the reification of cultures and legitimization of the existing order by means of the scientific instrumental thinking and productive process. These two have designed a power that naturalized and justified social relations, and fostered an absolute, theological view of history, taking the concept of "progress" as the starting point. The Open Lecture must be understood on this framework: native peoples' knowledge, beliefs and struggle, shown in this very University. That made possible to present native peoples as political actors, holders of an epistemological and biocentric cosmic matrix.

Native peoples own an environmental knowledge which has redirected the way they produce and live, and this knowledge is part of the struggle they face as guardians of biodiversity and sustainability. In Open Lecture, diversity as a political and philosophical matrix is represented by territorial and historical consistency, when cultural and natural biodiversity are fused in an environmental diversity, which is in turn a vital stimulus for the democratization of life and politics. Such experience has led us to understand that native knowledge must be regarded not only as the symbolic production of meaning, sense and interpreting, but also as a praxis. It conveys more than "representing of thinking" because when native peoples struggle to preserve their identity and cultural values, their reproduction practices and management of nature, they are involved in a cultural legacy which may be considered as an alternative paradigm of sustainability. The knowledge native peoples possess and preserve in their collective memory must be seen, from a political perspective, as a liberating instrument for all of them, men and women (4). The reason is that they have treasured in their collective memory that load of *profund ancestry*, which erects as a referent for present and future action. We gather that, while they regain their history, we can reflect upon ours and, taking advantage of their knowledge and creativity, we can come up with a new "think-do", meant to enable us to regain the feeling of belonging towards our Mother Earth. This is achieved through a daily bond with the sacred and, if we try to turn it into a political project facing future, it could mean acquiring the ability to concrete our utopias.

By giving a new signification to the meanings of "different" and "diverse", we were able to dialogue with others, denied women and men, the same way as nature was denied by the dominant cosmology, subordinated to the reification of goods to be exploited. As a political strategy and *epistemic disobedience* (Mignolo 2010), we have set forth Open Lecture, with the goal of deconstructing the codes that have built the different forms of colonialism. Building sustainability means going forward into a politics based on participative democracy, it is to imagine a new way of telling reality through the challenge of the novelty, as Paulo Freire has taught us. However, to enable this cultural struggle, it is paramount for us to regain the word, and provide new meanings to ancestral traditions.

The perverse ways of mercantilizing and subjecting nature and life have a story to tell, so it is now impossible to avoid (5) the different ways native peoples have had to represent their past. Thus, our work has two faces: on the one hand, we try and understand the current environmental crisis –as a civilizing crisis–and on the other, we try and project a future action. These are our tasks...

## To Round Up

From these two new spaces where knowledge can be rescued and forged, we have promoted an epistemological debate on the complexities of the crisis and on the environmental knowledge. Discussion surrounding Latin American environmental policy may begin in our curricula.

In both spaces we have committed ourselves to gain scientific knowledge engaged with sustainability, framed in the environmental issues and expressed through an intercultural dialogue. In the context of the current crisis, where we face rampant environmental issues, a special kind of knowledge has to be conveyed: it must offer non-reductionist views and avoid fragmented analyses so as to end the division among disciplines.

Moreover, this environmental knowledge has to be multiple: there will be different kinds of knowledge; and it must be the result of the participation of different social actors, who will bring about updated processes through their projects and provide new answers to the political challenge of building sustainable societies.

We have created these academic spaces as the ground to start thinking politics and society, and also as shelters for diverse and plural cosmovisions. We are devoted to unveil the homogeneous matrix of the mechanistic and anthropocentric paradigm, the reduced and simplified knowledge that the Western logocentrism has imposed on us.

We are convinced that from our place we can fight against colonialism and the academic paradigms that have created unsustainable knowledge. These spaces were conceived to enable confluence and dialogue, to enable an exchange of knowledge from different disciplines, in order to re-signify politics in our continent.

Sustainable development is then seen as a political and social project, focused on peoples' free determination and on respect to all expressions of life. In this sense, it provides new meanings to the concept of *democracy* <sup>(6)</sup> while questioning the dominant speech of homogeneity. We analyze the transformation of power relations in terms of knowledge and production. The ideas of sustainability and the policies about environment we promote from our seminar and the Open Lecture have brought about a wide range of perspectives. These seek the possibility of breaking free from the economic rationale of western modernity; to set ourselves apart from the neoliberal speech that identifies sustainable development with economic growth, a belief enforced by the logic of the market.

By gaining an environmental knowledge we make politics green, and from native peoples' words we rescue the skills needed to be productive. We are committed to an environmental ethics, aided by a recovery of the sensory experience and the notion of care. We wish to make sure that environmental right may be re-signified in this new context, full of alternatives. As there is only one world, many worlds will have to fit into it. But we need to be sure that different peoples' rights on environment are upheld, and the foundational pillars on which we build new conditions should be respect and understanding of one another's lives

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- (4) Quijano Valencia, Olver 2000. "La pretensión "hegemónica" de la cultura occidental y el sincretismo de nuestro espacio-tiempo", en: [www.naya.org.ar/congreso2000/](http://www.naya.org.ar/congreso2000/)

## Notes

- (1) It is well worth mentioning that the concept of Environmental Education, as well as the concept of Sustainable Development, is crossed by a polysemic semantic approach. Although environmental education dates back to 1972 and it is still a field on progress, in our continent it was made known through cultural, political and educational ways of acquiring knowledge.
- (2) The College of Political Science and International Relations offers the following undergraduate programs: Political Science, International Relations, Communication and Media Studies and Social Work. Students from these areas have attended the Optional curricular seminar. It was also attended by students from Anthropology (College of Humanities and Arts) and Psychology (College of Psychology).
- (3) The Open Lecture: Native Peoples' Knowledge, Beliefs and Struggle was approved by early 2009 and presented to society in September. It is made of a Native Advisory Board of representatives from nine native peoples: Qom, Mocoví, Charrúa, Kolla, Diaguita, Quilmes, Mapuche, Rankulche and Guaraní; and an Academic Advisory Board of faculty members from four national universities. Since it was created, Osvaldo Bayer is its Honorary President.
- (4) It is possible due to the native knowledge. Although it responds to an ancestral legacy, this knowledge is not tied to the past, immovable. On the contrary, through the long story of domination and the varied and consecutive troubles native peoples have faced, they have been able to re-invent their knowledge in their daily confrontation to others, and to take else's and new skills and knowledge if considered useful for their "re-existence".
- (5) As Quijano Valencia points out (2000:6): "In the light of this phenomenon, we distinguish how the resistance processes allow permanence and preservation of several traces, faces and trails that today show a process of artificially erased writing in which a multicultural and polyphonic society is built. In other words, Latin America is like a palimpsest –a text that can be understood completely when read but is made up of other texts, which are also understood when read. However, these other texts are perfectly coherent when analyzed individually and they erect themselves as cultural complexes".
- (6) Our conception of democratic life implies promotion of cultural diversity, social equity and massive participation of all peoples in the social process of re- appropriating nature, thus allowing to develop identities, a process taking place in a territory which is seen as a safe place for them to call home and to be who they are.