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Environmental Rationality: The Social Re-Appropriation of Nature¹

On the verge of the abyss, facing the entropic death of the planet, a question emerges about the meaning of meaning beyond all hermeneutics. The environmental crisis generated by the totalizing hegemony of a globalized world – the homogenization that results from the unity of science and the forced unification of the market – is not alien to the enigmatic place of the 'self' vis-à-vis the 'other' that Rimbaud questions when he asserts "je est un autre", giving the starting signal to the deconstruction of the being, shaking its pleasurable selfhood in the self-consciousness of the science-subject, and boosting it into the meeting with otherness; or else to the dissociation between the being and the significance of the world -the lack of correspondence between words and things- which Mallarmé refers to when he evidences the absence of any rose in the word rose.

The environmental crisis, as reification of the world, has its origins in the symbolic nature of the human being but it starts to sprout with the modern positivist project which seeks to establish an equivalence between the concept and the real. However, the environmental crisis is not only one of the lack of signification of words, the loss of references and the dissolution of the senses that postmodernism denounces: it is also the crisis of the effects of knowledge over the world.

Beyond the epistemological controversies about the truth and objectivity of knowledge; beyond the problem of real representation through theory and science,

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the knowledge has turned against the world; it has interfered and dislocated it. Before emerging as a problem of knowledge in the field of epistemology, this crisis of modern rationality manifested itself in the sensitivity of poetry and philosophical thought. Yet, the critique of Enlightened reason and modernity which had been initiated by the critique of metaphysics (Nietzsche, Heidegger), critical rationalism (Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse), structuralist thought (Althusser, Foucault, Lacan), and by the philosophy of postmodernism (Levinas, Deleuze, Guattari, Derrida), was not enough to convey the radicalism of the limits-law of nature against the ravings of economic rationality. This had to be shown in the reality of nature, outside the symbolic order, to do justice to reason. The environmental crisis irrupts at a time when the rationality of modernity translates into an anti-natura reason. This is not a functional or operative crisis of the prevailing economic rationality, but rather one of its foundations and ways of knowing the world. Environmental rationality thus emerges out of the questioning of the economization of the world, out of the overflow of the reifying rationality of modernity, out of the excesses of objectivist and utilitarian thought.

The environmental crisis is a product of knowledge –be it true or false- about the real, about matter, about the world. It is a crisis of the ways of comprehending the world, since mankind makes its appearance as an animal inhabited by language which makes human history split from natural history, makes it a history of meaning and of the meaning assigned by the words to things, generating power strategies in theory and in knowledge that have disrupted the real to forge the modern world- system.

Cultural miscegenation throughout human history has merged genetic codes and language codes through various cultural forms of meaning-making and appropriation of nature. The economic rationalization of the world, founded in the scientific project of modernity, has managed to scrutinize the most intimate core of nature, unleashing the energy of the atom, discovering the black holes of the cosmos and penetrating the genetic code of life. Worldviews and forms of knowing the world have created and transformed the world in many different ways throughout history. But the unprecedented character of the environmental crisis of our times lies in the form and the degree to which the rationality of modernity has impacted the world, undermining the very foundations of the sustainability of life and invading the life-worlds of the different cultures that make up the human race, on a planetary scale.

Our knowledge has unstructured ecosystems, degraded the environment, denaturalized nature. It is not only that the sciences have become power instruments,

that this power appropriates the power of nature, and that this power is used by some people against other people: the military use of the knowledge and the overexploitation of the nature. The rationality of modernity is gnawing its own guts, like Saturn devouring his progeny, undermining the foundations of life sustainability and perverting the symbolic order that accompanies its eco-destructive volition. Environmental epistemology not only poses the problem of knowing a complex world, but also how this knowledge engenders the complexity of the world. The reintegration of reality through a holistic view and complex thought is impossible because the rationality of knowledge to apprehend and change the world has invalidated the real and subverted life.

Trans-genesis and environmental complexity inaugurate a new relationship between ontology, epistemology and history.

The environmental crisis is not only the mutation of modernity to a post-modernity, an epistemic change marked by post-structuralism, environmentalism, deconstruction, the emergence of a world beyond nature and words. It is neither a cultural change capable of being absorbed into the same rationality nor of escaping reason. The environmental crisis opens a new relationship between the real and the symbolic. Beyond the loss of theoretical references, beyond the equivalence of Logos and reality, and the signification of words about reality, entropy confronts us with reality, rather than with a supreme law of matter: it places us within the limit and the potency of nature, at the opening of its relationship with the symbolic order, the production of meaning and creativity of language. Against the epic of knowledge to apprehend a concrete, objective and present totality, environmental epistemology investigates the history of what has not come to be and what has still not come to be (denied externality, subjugated possibility, repressed otherness), but which drawing on the potency of reality, the forces at play in reality, and on the creativity of cultural diversity, is still possible. It is the utopia of a sustainable future.

From the fault lines of modern thought, emerges an environmental rationality which allows to unveiling the perverse circles, the enclosures and chains that link the categories of thought and the scientific concepts to the rationality core of its strategies of domination of nature and culture. As if with a muffler, through the haze of greenhouse gases that cover the earth and blind ideas, this book unravels the effect of theoretical, economical and instrumental rationality, in the reification of the world, up to the abysmal point in which it goes into meltdown with the environmental crisis. It shows the epistemological causes of this crisis, the knowledge forms that anchored in metaphysics and in the ontology of entity, have come to un-structure the planetary ecosystemic organization and degrade the

environment. It critiques the concepts with which philosophy jealously guarded the understanding of the world -value , dialectics , law , economics , rationality- and the hope for its transcendence through the self-organization of matter, the evolution of life and culture, the reconciliation of opposites or generalized ecology. The ideology of progress and of growth without limits clashes with the law of natural limits, initiating the redefinition of the world for the construction of an alternative rationality.

The environmental rationality rebuilds the world from the arrow of time and the entropic death of the planet, but also from the potency of negentropy and the redefinition of nature by culture. The existential condition of mankind becomes more complex when the temporality of life faces the erosion of its ecological and thermodynamic conditions of sustainability, but also when it opens to the future by the power of desire, the thirst for power, the creativity of diversity, the encounter with otherness, and the fertility of difference.

The deconstruction of reason triggered by the eco-destructive forces of an unsustainable world, and the building of an environmental rationality, is not just a philosophical and theoretical enterprise. The latter is rooted in social practices and new political actors.

It is, at the same time, an emancipation process that implies the decolonization of knowledge under the domination of the globalizing and totalizing thought, to fertilize local knowledges. Building sustainability is the designing of new worlds of life, changing the meaning of the signs that have fixed meanings of things. It is not a description of the world that projects the actual reality toward an uncertain future, but rather a description of what has been written, prescribed, enrolled in the knowledge of reality, the usual knowledge that has become intertwined with the world. An environmental rationality recovers the cryptic sense of the being to unearth the buried and crystallized senses, to restore the link with life, with the life desire, to fertilize the humus of existence, meaning that the tension between Eros and Thanatos is resolved pro- life, where the entropic death of the planet is reversed by negentropic creative culture.

If the Enlightenment generated a totalitarian thought that ended up nesting a death instinct in the body, in the feelings, in the senses and in reason, the environmental rationality is a way of thinking that is rooted in life, through a policy centered in being and difference.

Environmental rationality inquires into and questions the iron core of totalitarian rationality because it desires life. It formulates new arguments that

nurture feelings to mobilize collective action, the enchantment with the world and the eroticization of life. It builds knowledges that instead of grabbing the truth of the world and subjecting it to its domination rather lead us to inhabit the riddle of existence and to coexist with the other. The ethic of otherness is not a dialectic of opposites that results in the reduction, exclusion and elimination of the adversary - the opposite other-, even in the transcendence and redemption of the world where a dominant thought imposes itself.

Environmental ethics explores the dialectic of the one and the other in the construction of a convivial and sustainable society. This involves not only the deconstruction of the Logos, but also of the unity and the one way of thinking as cornerstone of civilization building -from the monotheism of the Jewish tradition to the absolute of the Hegelian idea-, towards thinking and living otherness, towards establishing a politics of difference.

Environmental rationality thus inquires into the foundation of the one and into the ignorance of the other, which have led to the fundamentalism of a universal unit and to the conception of identities as sameness without otherness, that has been exacerbated in the process of globalization in which the terrorism and environmental crisis make their appearance as a sign of the decadence of life, of the will to become suicidal and murderer of the other, of the loss of meaning that is entailed in the reification of the world and the commoditization of the nature. Environmental rationality seeks to contain dislocations of opposites as dialectic of history to build a world of diversity and coexistence.

This book is not yet another attempt to understand, interpret and bring a new meaning to reality, to harmonize economic globalization with complexity-thinking. It is not about reshuffling the cards to predict the future in the beads assortment for sustainability. For what the environmental crisis involves is not only the limits of signs, logic, mathematics to apprehending the real word; it is not only the failure of language to speak and to decide the world. The logos that served to nominate and designate things to forge life-worlds has now become knowledge. And knowledge does not just name, describe, explain and understand reality.

Science and technology disrupt and overthrow the reality they seek to know, control, and transform. Environmental rationality deconstructs positivistic rationality to mark its limits of signification and its intrusion into being and subjectivity; to highlight the ways it has traversed the social body, intervened life-worlds of different cultures and degraded the environment on a global scale. Environmental rationality opens a new perspective on the relationship between the

real and the symbolic once that signs, language, theory, and science have become knowledge and rationalities that have reshaped the real, re-coding reality as a world-object and world economy. Environmental rationality builds new life-worlds in the re-articulation between culture and nature, beyond the pretension to force the equalization of the real and the symbolic in an ontological monism; it recognizes their duality and difference in the human constitution.

From the derangement of nature and reason as expressed in the environmental crisis, emerges a new rationality for rebuilding the world beyond the ontology and epistemology, on the basis of otherness and difference.

This book stems from pieces grossly carved on the hard stone of thought on which my first thoughts about political ecology and environmental epistemology were shaped twenty-five years ago. I have taken up some of these texts, to the extent that they inquired into some of the core and exemplary blocks of the rationality of modernity - especially those from thought and discourse critical of modernity-against which the concept of environmental rationality was gradually outlined, contrasted and built: economic value; environmentalist thought; the discourse and geopolitics of sustainable development; the entropy in the economic process; power relations in knowledge; the relationship between culture and nature; and the social movements for the re-appropriation of nature.

These texts were trapped in their original magma just as those slaves by Michelangelo, in which the form struggles to emerge from its marmoreal origin. In its theoretical syntax the category of environmental rationality loomed as an intuition barely suggested. I again wield the chisel to release these texts from their archaic form, to infuse movement to the original rock of their inquisitive thinking, to deconstruct and reconstruct them from the perspective of an emerging environmental rationality that reveals the limits of modern thinking, to think about the time-condition of sustainability.

The texts of each chapter are slaves of their respective times, of the thought forms, the language-turns, and the theoretical syntax with which they were originally articulated and structured. Time again hits the hard stone in which ideas are crystallized, to allow new sap to flow from their bowels. Like in a moving painting where the various scenes of the epistemic landscape are captured in the fluid canvas of time, the discursivities and arguments of the modern episteme are intertwined, until they gradually mute, silenced by their own contradictions and signifying limits, to give voice to that other that is environmental knowledge, which

establishes the benchmarks and demarcation lines out of where a new rationality is configured.

The environmental rationality is constituted through being contrasted with the theories, thought, and rationality of modernity. Its concept brewed in the discursive matrix of nascent environmentalism, starting to create its own universe of meaning. This book is the forging of this concept. Its theoretical construction is not a process of growing formalization and concept axiomatization to show its objective truth, but rather one of emergence of new civilizational senses that are forged within environmental knowledge, beyond all theoretical idealism and the objectification of the world through knowledge. Environmental rationality is forged from within an ethic of otherness, in an “dialogue between ways of knowing” and a politic of difference, beyond every ontology and epistemology that claim to know and encompass the world, to control nature and restrain life-worlds.

The first chapter approaches the concept of value upon which Karl Marx founded one of the cornerstones of critical thought about conventional economics. Beyond historicity of the concept of labor-value as a result of technological progress, its deconstruction acquires new perspectives when the principle of an objective value is contrasted with the principles of environmental rationality.

The second chapter questions the ecological thinking -mainly as proposed in Murray Bookchin's dialectical naturalism- and discusses the issue of ontological monism-dualism in the context of environmental complexity. Chapter 3 inquires about the dislocation of the symbolic order and of the understanding of the world by the hyper-reality generated through knowledge. The thought of Jean Baudrillard is fused with the discourse and the geopolitics of sustainable development, reformulating sustainability as a new meeting between the real and the symbolic.

Chapter 4 advances that purpose in that it confronts economic theory with the limiting entropy law, contrasting Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen's and Ilya Prigogine's contributions, and updating my proposal for the construction of a paradigm of sustainable production and negentropic productivity. Chapter 5 occupies the center of the book to develop the concept of environmental rationality from Max Weber's critique of modern rationality.

In chapter 6 I return to the issue of environmental knowledge and therein interwoven power relations drawing on Michel Foucault, opening up a critical reflection in the field of political ecology and pushing postmodern thought to a politics of being, difference, and cultural diversity.

Chapter 7 opens the construction of environmental rationality demarcating it from Jürgen Habermas' postulate of communicative rationality, and attracting Manuel Levinas ethical thought about otherness into the environmental field to frame the building of a sustainable future as a dialogue between ways of knowing.

In chapter 8 I develop the application of the concept of environmental rationality to the relationship between nature and culture as a privileged site for the reconstruction of the relationship between the Real and the Symbolic from a sustainability perspective. I start from my previous arguments about the building of a productive rationality grounded in the cultural significance of nature, updating a reflection about the relationship between ecological culture and environmental rationality, and in turn linking this with George Bataille's thought about the gift and the urge to spending.

Chapter 9 brings the reflection about the environmental rationality back to its social construction through the constitution of new political actors and through its deployment in emerging environmental movements. I return here to my thoughts on these social movements and on the relationship between poverty and environmental degradation, to look at the reinvention of identities in the current struggles for the re-appropriation of nature and the culture of indigenous peoples, peasants, and local populations.

Environmental rationality is constructed through a struggling with the theoretical rationality that inhabits Marx's materialistic view of history, Bookchin's dialectical naturalism, Baudrillard's postmodern rhetoric, Georgescu-Roegen's entropy law, Prigogine's dissipative thermodynamics, Morin's complexity thinking, Habermas' communicative rationality and Heidegger's ontology.

The book discusses the contributions and limitations of these authors and the grand narratives grounded in essentialist concepts, as well as the regulating principles that have generated a totalitarian, encompassing, realistic and objectivist worldview, out of where the environmental rationality is emerging: from labor-value; from the generative, evolutionary and dialectical self-organization of matter and the 'ecologization' of the world; from the law of entropy as the limit-law of nature and inevitable death of the planet; from symbolic organization as ordering force of the relationship between culture and nature; from power relations in knowledge; from difference as opposed to the generic ontology of the being; from an ethics of otherness beyond communicative rationality; from the invention of identities beyond all essentialism.

The book deconstructs these rationality-blocks pushing them to the limit of their meaning -where they are trapped in their own theoretical and discursive labyrinth- to discover their blind spots and find an exit door in the shadows of the unexpected and in what remains unthought-of. Knots are untied; the fabric is unraveled; concepts dissolve, vanish, but new discursive frames are woven throughout which an inquiry progresses that opens up avenues of thought in an endless exploration, where the sense of finding an understanding of the world remains that is not fixed by a paradigm and a theoretical framework forcing an equalization between the real (possible) and an established idea, where the construction of reality becomes subject to a law. It is the environmental rationality framework that the needle moves along through the fabric of the theories that have sustained and impeached the world, to weave a new reason that illuminates new civilizational pathways and constructs new realities.

From threshold to threshold, the concept of environmental rationality is contrasted with the concepts that sustain modern rationality exposing their own limits in the understanding of environmental complexity. Environmental rationality appears as a mediator between the material and the symbolic, a way of thinking that brings out both the potential of the real and the emancipatory character of creative thinking, rooted in cultural identities and existential senses, in a politics of being and of difference, in the construction of a new paradigm of sustainable production based on negentropy and human creativity principles. Environmental rationality asserts a new relationship between theory and praxis, a politics of theoretical concepts and strategies that mobilize social action towards sustainability. Beyond the totalitarian realism of the theories that have sustained modern thinking, environmental rationality seeks to rethink the relationship between the real and the symbolic in today's globalized world, the mediation between culture and nature, to confront the power strategies that span the geopolitics of sustainable development.

This book is not a collage of my previous writings on these topics. These have been grafted, amalgamated and interwoven, opening communicating vessels and reconstituting the textual corpus in which the concept of environmental rationality is built. These texts have been key pieces of this discursive tapestry; they have served as backdrop and frame in which this concept is drawn. These ideas pop out of their representative image to walk around in the world, where environmental rationality is built into the social processes re-appropriation of nature. Thus a discourse is articulated with a set of production practices and political processes, where the concept of environmental rationality is being outlined, gaining substance and attributes, where it unfolds as it is contrasted with the cores and spheres of

theoretical rationality and with processes of modern social rationalization, and applied to the building of sustainable communities and societies.

Writing this book has required the work of a craftsman, in which I have taken my own drafts and essays to develop a bigger picture, where they have been relocated within the discursive space and the architecture of the book, setting new perspectives and illuminating the center occupied by the main character: the environmental rationality. This discursive fabric is not a Goblin tapestry, but a tapestry made of different textures; its texts are intertwined in a contextual game, with different levels and perspectives, without aiming to a definitive representation. Many of the ideas that are announced in the book have just been outlined: the relationship between culture and rationality, between being and knowledge; the assimilation of knowledge by identities, and the rooting of knowledge in 'territories of life'; the social processes and the cultural forms of re-appropriation of nature, of environmental services and of the common goods of the planet; the power strategies that can bring about a world of cultural diversity, a globalization process that articulates negentropic productivity islands and a sustainable future built out of a dialogue between ways of knowing. These are open gaps to keep thinking and building: the mediation values in an ethics of otherness, that without reducing diversity to sameness, enable autonomies to proliferate without fearing the axiological relativism generated by the cult to an insuring unity; that establish values or the coexistence of differences that contain the outbreak of violence and animosity toward the other by the confrontation of interests, senses of truth-regimes and rationality-matrixes; the social legitimation of a right to difference that rules out the dialectic of violence of opposites as an explanation of historical evolution. These are loose ends and suspension bridges, like lianas waiting for other grammatical, epistemological and political monkeys to catch them to move through the treetops and forests of wisdom. It is an open frame to be further weaved with ideas born out of environmental rationality.

Some will question the relationship I establish between the concept of environmental rationality and the spheres of sensitivity, ethics, and knowledge, which so far have remained outside the order of formal and instrumental rationality; outside of the economic, legal, and technological rationality that have formed the backbone of the project of modernity. But this rationality has begun to crack and is flooded by islands of irrationality. Meanwhile, the sphere of culture, the signification processes and the production of meaning amalgamate with reason as they are reasonable; as different cultures in their relationship with nature, when they build their meanings linking language and reality, the real and the symbolic,

construct different matrixes of rationality. Environmental rationality articulates the diverse cultural orders and spheres of knowledge, beyond the logical structures and rational paradigms of knowledge.

The concept of environmental rationality is thus being constituted in a support for critical thinking that is not intended as a scientific paradigm, as an axiomatized and systematized knowledge, which can induce a rationalization process towards the attainment of ends and means instrumentally outlined from a sustainability perspective, as a concept capable of being "completed" through theoretical thinking and social action. This book, being consistent with the status of environmental knowledge, aims at deconstructing a rationality which is oppressive of life, but just as the language in which it is expressed, it cannot speak a final word. It opens a way to make roads, to work on territories of life, to enchant the existence beyond the objectivity-fences of a reason de force majeure that nullifies the sense of history.

I write from Mexico and most of this book was written in the years I have worked for the United Nations Environmental Programme as coordinator of the Environmental Training Network for Latin America and the Caribbean. Perhaps the content of this book could have been thought and written anywhere on the planet. But the power of environmental rationality has become manifest to me through the presence and experience of the ecological and cultural richness of this beautiful region of the world, which has led my reflection on these issues. Many notes, ideas and texts were made during countless trips in which we have built partnerships with governments and universities; as well as solidarity-bonds with academic, social and labor groups in favor of environmental education.

The reflections of this book are intertwined with an increasingly broad social movement for Sustainability Ethics which is expressed in a Manifesto for Life; many names are already inscribed in the construction of a Latin American Environmental Thought and an Alliance for Environmental Education, where the efforts of the Confederation of Education Workers of Argentina (CTERA) are to be highlighted. In the field opened by political ecology, environmental rationality can engage in dialogue with social movements in order to build sustainable societies and for the re-appropriation of nature and of their territories of life. This book was created out of and inserts itself into the social process of building a sustainable future.

All names! How many would I have to name to leave record of my gratitude to the people who at different times have encouraged and given impetus to the thoughts reflected in this book, who have left their mark through writings,

dialogues, and debates; through their presence and through meetings; solidarity and complicity; through sharing life? Those who have more tangibly agitated my thinking and my instinct, and who attracted my passion for thinking and writing, are listed in the references throughout the book, in my alliances and demarcations vis-à-vis their thoughts. They are presences without which this book would not exist.

Because there is no thought that does not arise in the context of its time, in congruence or discord with what someone already said or wrote, from the Alef to the Omega of human culture. Other, closer presences, have accompanied my way throughout the invitations to give courses and seminars, where live-dialogue has stimulated my thoughts on these issues. How to do justice to all those who over the years, by convening me, have made me think and write; to all those colleagues and partners which by discussing these issues have made me aware of new problems that had to be thought, of positions that needed stronger foundations, and of arguments requiring further development? This thought is linked to networks in ecological economics, political ecology, and environmental education, in which I have forged alliances of ideas and life with endearing environmentalist friends; a list which, to my fortune, is extensive. Among them I must thank the students of my seminar on political ecology at UNAM, with whom we have established a space for debate and the free creation of ideas. And above all, I must thank those presences and absences that form the intimate fabric of my life: my parents, my sisters and my brother, my beloved and indispensable friends; and those in my closest universe where the light of Jacquie, Tatiana and Sergio shine, as architects and support of my existence.

Finally, I want to express my gratitude to my friends from Siglo XXI, my publisher and home to its authors, for allowing my obsession that this book, like its predecessors saw the light in this even year, and for their love and carefulness in the editing of the text.