

Commentary

" After Rio: A New
Relationship
Between North and
South?*" "

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The Second United Nations Conference on the Environment and Development (UNCED) held in Rio de Janeiro in June 1992 marked a decisive step forward. Rio contributed to a wider acceptance of the idea that humankind shares an essential unity in the face of the global catastrophe toward which its own follies are leading. Ecologists have been struggling for some time to generate a global analysis and have been pushing for a greater sense of responsibility and for acceptance of transnational action against models of non-sustainable development. It is worth celebrating this progress towards a world-wide ecological accord.

Despite its positive final outcome, the Rio Conference got off to a poor start. The reason, of course, was the timing of the event. Rio came close on the heels of the historic shift in the major cleavage of world affairs, symbolized by the Gulf War. As soon as long-standing East-West rivalries were put to rest with the end of the Cold War, the real conflict — between North and South — could make its

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appearance. With the Gulf War, the North cynically declared that its new world order depended upon a double standard, a sort of "do what I say, not what I do."

Well protected by its borders, steadfastly refusing the refugees fleeing the disasters whose seeds it had sown, the North — and the United States in particular — has believed itself capable of imposing its preferences, its "justice," on the South. Techniques have varied, ranging from launching Cruise missiles to freezing loans, imposing the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) structural adjustment regimes, and blockading food. Whatever the specific methods, however, the underlying message was the same: a new "iron curtain" would separate the included from the excluded. The line passed through the centre of Europe, dividing Italy from Albania, Croatia from Serbia, Hungary from Rumania. A new wall now surrounds and protects the richest areas of Europe, and excludes the rest. Even the Mediterranean islands and the south of Italy are being abandoned to unemployment and the Mafia.

The Trap In this context, "environmental concerns" could be piously deployed to oppose the development needs of the South by the same people who, for the last 150 years, had helped themselves to the world's resources and pillaged the planet. Indeed, the Rio conference might have turned into a confrontation between the North, whose productivism is already satiated, and the dictatorships of the South, which still seek to live through the productivist moment. Neither of these positions, of course, paid the slightest attention to the needs of the mass of Third World peasants and the poverty-stricken of the *bidonvilles*, for whom sustainable development means the protection and improvement of their environment.

In truth, there is no fundamental contradiction between the "environment" and "development." We must reject this false dichotomy and always remember that for the immense majority of the planet, development itself means first and foremost an end to environmental degradation. *Sustainable development is development which is based on solidarity among peoples.* Only when the people of the South are able

to begin to use farming methods which are less destructive and more productive, to cook more efficiently, to purify their water, will they put an end to practices which exhaust everything as they consume nature. For most of the residents of this planet, development means, most basically, the right to health, to a life of freedom from the struggle to survive.

Nonetheless, the most serious danger which ecologists and third-world activists, from both the North and the South, faced, as the Rio Conference got underway, was the supposed contradiction between environmental protection and development. They were being pushed toward this trap both by a lack of understanding and by a certain Machiavellism. The escape hatch which they eventually found came in the form of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), which, as representatives of public opinion world-wide, were well placed to avoid such dangers.

This trap had several trigger points. The first was the self-satisfaction of the North, which led to a call for "environmentalism before development." Adopting this discourse permitted ecologists from the North to express great concern about what was being burned in the South without paying any attention to its own furnaces. It allowed an impassioned defence of wild animals restricted to African reserves while ignoring aboriginal peoples confined on "reserve lands." Naturalism could be set in opposition to humanism. This Northern ecological stance fed the idea that there is a supposed conflict between the environment and development, by claiming only one could be achieved, not both.

The second trigger for the trap was the cynicism of Southern elites, including the generals with megalomaniac ambitions who promoted unfettered capitalism. They called for "development, despite the environment." As the prime minister of one Asian country succinctly put it, "ecology, trade unions, democracy, and human rights are nothing but obstacles the North uses to slow down the development of its future competitors." Here too ecology and development appear in opposition, so one must be chosen and the other abandoned.

What lies behind these two discourses of "development vs. environment?" Behind the first, which privileges the

environment, are Northern elites who want the Amazon kept for their benefit as a depository of biodiversity, and as the thermostat for the air-conditioner that lowers the heat generated by their own extravagances. Behind the second, in which development concerns push aside any about the environment, we find the middle classes of middle countries and the wealthy in poor countries. Their only goal is to squander in the style of the "truly rich," even when it means trampling over the needs of their own people, ravaging the ecosystem of their own country and misappropriating the inheritance of their own children.

Up until a year before the Rio Conference, the NGOs involved in promoting development and environmental protection from all over the world, and particularly in France, were falling into this trap, and ended up tearing each other apart. There were many reasons for conflict, of course. Distrust might have been a part of it. Lack of experience in working together was also perhaps a contributing factor. There may have been feelings of inferiority on the part "poor young" NGOs, like *Environnement français*, in the company of the "big" development NGOs, or of "poor" Latin American development NGOs confronting "rich" anglo-saxon environmental NGOs.

Whatever the story, however, NGOs behaved as if they had to choose one side or the other, as if the choice were between development *or* the environment. For example, there was the radical ecology position which rejected *all* technical progress and therefore ignored any which might actually challenge the dominant model of development. Their radicalism enabled some Northern intellectuals to label plans for conserving energy as nothing but "eco-productivism," even as they flew off, trailing a jet-stream, to visit "their" neolithic tribes on the other side of the globe. Conversely, there were those who adopted a position which can only be described "humanist terrorism," claiming to act in the name of today's poor. They were willing to defend the poor's interests, even if it meant acting against the interests of the environment and therefore of tomorrow's poor.

These contradictions are not altogether imaginary. The point is, however, that rather than banishing one principle

because it contradicts another in some ways, it is more useful to accept that a complex reality cannot be reduced to a single issue. Conflicts are real, and therefore they must be addressed as problems to be solved together, by the North, by the South, and by the two acting together. The Rio Conference set us off down this long road, even if the world's press missed the start.

The Turn-Around at Rio The events of the last stage of negotiations at the UN Conference were unimaginable a year before. A diplomatic moment of great significance for the future of the environment occurred at Rio, despite the twists and turns of the delegation from the United States, led by its Secretary of the Environment, who was reined in in an humiliating way by the Department of State. The USA lost the first battle in a war that it had itself launched.

And there clearly is a war to be fought. The press may ridicule the results of the UN Conference, claiming that, as usual, the mountain gave birth to a mouse. In doing so, however, these sceptics fail to appreciate the magnitude of the world-wide ecological crisis which threatens the first half of the 21st century. It can only be compared to the 14th century catastrophe which annihilated one-half of the population of Europe. Recovery from that crisis took two centuries and a complete change in the law and techniques for land use — moving away from feudal rights towards mixed farming, stock raising and enclosure of the commons.

Such changes did not happen in two years of negotiation but over years of wars and revolutions. Rio could only be expected to signal the immensity of local and global risks and to proclaim general principles. It could only open the debate around the fundamental question: "Who is responsible?" The question generated an unexpected answer. This was the surprise success at Rio.

Two years before the Conference, everything seemed clear. "Rio" meant the Rainforest. And the Rainforest meant biological diversity. The greenhouse effect was reduced to the Rainforest. Because the Rainforest was being burned by mad Southern dictators, productivist elites in the South, and ignorant peasants, the North could easily agree on an agenda.

Well armed with a clear conscience and a self-ascribed right to organize the world into a "rights crusade" (as manifested by the Gulf War), the governments of the North, led by the United States and supported by their naive NGOs, went forth to preach the good word and defeat the Saddam Husseins of the environment — the governors of the Amazonian states and the Prime Minister of Malaysia.

This interpretation of things did not stand up to the politics of Rio, however. There, the United States was charged with being history's big bad wolf. Bush became the Saddam Hussein of the environment. Abandoned by its traditional allies — Canada, the United Kingdom, and France — the USA found that even the European Community was critical of feeble Northern efforts and enthused about the technological possibilities offered by Japan. Thus, Rio revealed what the Gulf War had successfully camouflaged. Despite its remaining military hegemony, the United States had lost its technological, financial and, as a result, political, lead.

As early as May 1992, when it signed the Convention on the Climate, the United States accepted three points which it had opposed in 1990 at Geneva. Without accepting a precise timetable for the reduction of its own emissions, the United States fully accepted that the levels of emission of gas in 2000 should be reduced to those of 1990, in order to combat the greenhouse effect. Moreover, this reduction was not to be simply a "global figure," but one measured gas by gas, so that the carbon dioxide emitted by the automobiles of the North would be considered alongside the methane generated by the paddy fields of the South. In addition, the regulation would apply first to the North, giving the South the chance to consume its legitimate portion of the atmosphere. In contrast, with respect to biodiversity, the pill was not swallowed. According to the ever vigilant industrial interests, "Molecules produced by the forest and traditional peasants are free; those created in laboratories have real costs."

This notion had been the political point of departure of the Northern countries. Faced with this position, the South and the NGOs insisted on and achieved a new distribution of rights. In consequence, the United States refused to sign.

It was the only hold-out — and therefore it may well have difficulty sustaining the position.

This dramatic reversal was due in part, of course, to the effrontery of the Bush administration, intoxicated by the success of its bombers in Iraq. Nevertheless, it was certainly also a result of the spectacular mobilization by NGOs in the IIIrd and IVth commissions for the preparation of the UNCED and the Ya Wananchi Conference of NGOs held in Paris in December 1991. By shaking the North out of its complacency and pressing their own governments to be less reticent, the Southern NGOs especially were able to bring together the powerful Northern NGOs — for instance, Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth, the World Wildlife Fund — and overturn the stereotype that “the South is the problem.”

As a result it is now possible to ask the tough questions. Will the North be able to alter its model of development? Will it willingly help the South move toward sustainable development? These will be major issues in the future struggles between NGOs and ecologists on one side and the irresponsible productivist elites in both North and South.

And Now? After Rio a number of pressing concerns remain to be settled. Access to and disposal of the common heritage of humanity must be regulated. It is essential to strengthen the resistance of the ecosystem to greenhouse effects and to maintain biological and genetic diversity. And it is obviously necessary to limit severely the emission of dangerous gases, like carbon dioxide, methane, and chlorofluorocarbons. The way to meet these concerns is, however, not by establishing “acceptable levels” or by setting percentage reductions. Either means would perpetuate the current situation. The rich countries, which are primarily responsible for the existing pollution, would simply retain the right to be the leading polluters in the future.

Instead, the right to utilize humanity’s common heritage — according to standards which guarantee sustainability — must be distributed to each country according to the size of its population. It is this solution which the Southern countries

claim. Only with such a shift will their citizens realize their right to live a decent life.

Doing so would force the North finally to give up its shameless squandering of resources. The priority for using the planet's oxygen belongs to the food crops of the South, not the automobiles of the North. A "Tennis Court Oath for the planet," in which the North would abandon those privileges that are leading toward catastrophe, could not have been expected from the UNCED. But a long cultural revolution has begun and our common destiny depends on its outcome.

If we are to reduce the threat of ecological disaster, certain principles are clear. It is not enough to grant certain "rights" to the South, unless they are accompanied by the technical and financial means to achieve them. In order for the South to develop, major transfers of technology and or money are required. Absolutely critical is elimination of the dead-weight of debt which is destroying the South and pushing its populations toward ecologically destructive behaviour in order to survive. Even major transfers of this sort will be inadequate if the South remains subjugated to dictatorships that are supported by the North as long as they serve its interest, and likely to be bombed if they do not. Technology and money will not be enough either if the law refuses women the right to control their own bodies.

In order to maximize their benefits, aid and other financial transfers should go primarily to popular, non-governmental associations, and to popular movements working for emancipation and respect for the environment. In situations where dictators are in power, financial pressure and even commercial embargoes are legitimate, providing that they are organized in consultation and cooperation with the forces of democratic opposition and ecologists.

Of course, none of these principles can be put into practice until a popular opinion emerges world-wide which is heedful of the need for solidarity and justice, which assumes responsibility for future generations and for all life on the planet. The major task of green movements world-wide is the promotion of this new set of values.