THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS AND REFLECTIONS ON THE SUSTAINABILITY DEBATE

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to introduce sustainability, as a concept that emerges as a critical response to the inconsistencies of the social and economic structures, as models that destabilize and accelerate the destruction of the environment in which they exist.

The analysis of the so-called social and environmental crisis is thought from an epistemological point of view and this opens up the debate about the complex emergence of the term.

1. INTRODUCTION

Along with the environmental crisis we are experiencing today, social conflicts are also becoming more acute. Depletion and pollution of natural resources worsen social inequalities, such as poverty, the clash between cultures, violence, food insecurity, gender equity and so on.

The question arises. How did we get here? Several authors specialized in social ecology, such as Daniel Wahl (2005), David Orr (2002), Enrique Leff (2004) agree that the origin of this environmental crisis is a dilemma of knowledge: the conceptual basis of our thought has built an unsustainable world.

2. SUBMITTING PAPER

The critical phenomena of the contemporary reality have made us consider, above all, our way of understanding life: an imperative arises that we cannot continue acting in the world as we have done so far. The theoretical means that have emerged to overcome this crisis are diverse, but something is clear, is necessary to reconceptualize the paradigms of knowledge that govern us by opening up to a dialogue of knowledge, that is, a holistic thinking that recognizes different visions about the understanding of life.

In terms of epistemology, it is referred to conceptual lenses by which our vision of the world is filtered (Leff, E. 2004). Reality is approached from the understanding provided by sciences, as structures which have been internalized and adopted as absolute structures to get to know, because that is their intention, to institutionalize a way of seeing reality as true. However, these ways of approaching knowledge are cultural constructions that provide referential frameworks, related to a specific view of reality.

To inquire about the way in which cultural context determines our rationality, we might say that we are determined through daily experience. This experience with the outside forms our way of thinking, understanding and valuing reality. Pierre Bordieu (2010) founded that the ways of acting, thinking and feeling are originated by the position that a person occupies in the social structure. In few words, our rationality is the reflection of the world views, social practices, moral values and legal norms of the society in which we live.

The subject is subjected to the structures which determines it. The structure is internalized but at the same time the subject also in its act is structuring reality, somehow is perpetuating what it′s been learned. These patterns describe the normalization of an epoch, expresses a collectivity oriented towards certain ends, established prohibitions and encouraged the actions of men, directing them towards contemplation, war, commerce, industry, or the protection of the environment. Thus different 'cultural rationalities' and 'social temperaments' have emerged throughout history (Leff, E. 2011).

Is in the modern era when sciences and the use of reason, are established as the means of true knowledge to emancipate human spirit from the tutelage of religion.

Science validates knowledge through the scientific method. There was a fragmentation of reality, humanity separated from nature, was an idea reinforced from philosophy itself. Hence, there is a definite separation between man as a subject and nature as an object. Nature is reified, and as such, it is disposed as things at our necessity, living beings are transformed into things, for example, a tree into paper, and a cow into a hamburger. Not only dominate but to own, that is the relationship we keep with the things of the world, such as property rights.

The social sciences adopted the methodological principles of the natural sciences and applied them to the research of the social fact. On one hand culture is studied ignoring the interrelations with the environment where the effects of established rationality are discharged. And on the other, there is a pretense to objectify, to impose absolutes on social reality so to impose a criterion of rationality.

Our scientific relationship with nature focused on learning how we could control nature and the social sciences were in charge of knowing man to dominate him. The Social Sciences exacerbated what is marginal and pathological to their conception of a normality imposed to maintain a certain social order (Foucault, M. 2003).

Development and progress concepts were strengthened, thanks to the support of scientific knowledge, based on society evolution and improvement thanks to accumulative process of knowledge. That is, scientific paradigms evolve from previous knowledge, in such a way that a rationalist concept of progress emerges. The "modern" is superior to the old because knowledge is the mean to ground the true (Calinescu, M., 1987). However, Michel Foucault (2003) reflects that these forms are only an episteme, a frame of knowing according to the determined "truth" imposed from a power. Knowledge works like a filter that validate beliefs, which are justified as true by a social group.

Then, progress of societies is supported by the advances of scientific knowledge and its technological expansion. Development summarizes the idea of the domain of nature, everything that separates us from nature and places us in front of human constructions.

The economic model based on these precepts was coupled with a previous mercantilist tradition as the way to obtain profits. Accumulation was also applied in the economy: the reproduction of capital in the short term based on a productive rationality and consumption, having as source of wealth natural resources and labor force exploitation. A competitive and individualistic logic is implied, if some may have more and accumulate, there will be others who in return have less.

The accelerated dynamic of the unlimited economic growth of capital has progressively depleted natural re-

sources, ignoring the regenerative cycles of nature. An exhaustive policy of resources consumption predominates, therefore, capitalism paradoxically destroys its own bases, so is an unsustainable device, it cannot perpetuate itself infinitely.

The effects of environmental crisis has been undeniable around the world and from the UN, recognizes the evidence that nature has limits and that it is urgent to modify the economic order to dominate the ecological consequences of this development (Our Common Future: Brundtland Report, ONU 20 March 1987).

Sustainable development seeks to balance, economic and social development with the protection of the environment. However, this development has been commonly interpreted as a greening of the productive means. The urgency of a profound change on human behavior and its relationship between human groups and nature does not arise. It is maintained that economic growth is the mean to create an atmosphere through which everyone can increase their productive capacity.

Contradiction lies in the concept of Sustainability, since its ecological principles, transferred to the social scale would suppose the complete refoundation of cultural system. The problem is not scientific nor technical, but fundamentally sociopolitical and ethical. The discourse of sustainable development has been manipulated in such a way that the process of appropriation of nature is justified, while aiming to achieve the illusion of a paradigm shift to weaken the tension between economic growth and environmental sustainability.

Since the acknowledgment of contemporary crisis, the environmental knowledge, constitutes itself with the purpose of deconstructing scientific paradigms of modern rationality. It arises as a reaction within, in such a way that the term sustainability did not exist before in any other culture, because it was not necessary.

In Michel Serres "The Natural Contract" (1991) the author reflects that cultures emerged saved from the war thanks to the establishment of a social contract, which is an agreement between two or more wills to create or transmit rights and obligations. This has made possible integrate ourselves into collectiveness, and in the same way, there should be a natural contract that must be established with the world. The way in which we act in nature is similar to that of a parasite, confuses use with abuse, lives from but at the same time harms its host, the parasite appropriates everything to remain without anything. A pact that leads us to dominate our domain, because unregulated this turns against us. It is necessary that a certain justice take place in the exchange, and to guarantee it, a contract is necessary. Nature from being a mere object is now conceived as a subject of rights.

Given the emergence of an unprecedented fact in history: the limit imposed by nature to the economic and social order, an answer is the emergence of an awareness of environmental complexity as a guideline for human intervention in the natural order (Leff, E. 2004). The term sustainability, comes from the study of living beings and refers to the ability of biological systems to conserve diversity and productivity over time (Capra, F. 1997).

This awareness of a complex and interrelated world with limited resources is contradicted by the objectives of accumulation of capital. On one hand, the official definition of "sustainable development" raises the possibility of guiding economic growth in such a way that environmental costs are calculated within the equation, but does not suggests that the economic system should adopt ecological and social sustainability conditions. Such an ambition would imply a change of attitude, not having more than we need, and taking just the necessary. Productivity shouldn´t compromise the stability of the ecosystem. Up to now, there are still obstacles to its deep understanding; which are nothing more than strategies of power that block or activate social action, and lead in such a way to continue with the rationality already established.

Environmental Rationality appeals to an awareness of human actions within their environment, sustained by the evidence that there is nothing more legitimate than our dependence on certain conditions of nature for life survival. This rupture with capitalist rationality makes possible coming up with other ways of facing poverty. According to Leff (2011), communities that has been excluded from development, must go through a self-recognition process as a social group and its territory. Then decide where they want to direct their future and determine the means theoretical and practical to go for it. In other words, there is a self-management of the ecological and socio-cultural system, so communities can strengthen their productive potential.

A source of sustainable productivity, might come from coupling cultural needs with appropriate technology. The concept of appropriate technology arises from the need of a technological application that coordinates traditional knowledge with scientific, according to human and ecological resources of a community.

Another definition alternative to Brundtland's sustainability "The guarantee that natural and cultural base will persist indefinitely and an equitable distribution of resources and access to them will be established between individuals, social groups, human generations and the rest of living beings" (Astier, M., Masera, O. R., & Miyashi, G., 2008).

The latter presupposes not only that ecological, technological and cultural productivity will always be constrained to the conditions of the environment. But unlike the official sustainability concept, contemplates the right of cultural continuity. A posture of this kind acquires ethical dimensions about respect for life and justice, since it proposes points of view on how we should act to ensure the survival of living beings. That is why sustainability is stated as a meta concept, a dynamic concept subjected to cultural relativity, this would mean that the aspirations among human societies are not the same and can vary from culture to culture, recognizing that any of these forms are totally equal and valid in their context.

Sustainability is then a dynamic concept that is interpreted from the different circumstances of human societies. The conception of a totalitarian discourse that leads humanity towards a sustainable transition is not possible,

the commitment on the establishment of a rationality that directs ethical values about an ideal relationship of the human being with nature, is a process that each society must resolve to ensure their well-being. This point of view contemplates the dialectical tension among cultures: there will be different points of departure through which Sustainability is understood.

Sustainability is utopian, it is not a fixed and achievable goal, rather it is a process that is in continuous interpretation and construction by a learning community on how to participate appropriately within the natural order. In any case these will be unrepeatable practices, since the rationality that shapes them, is limited by the perspective of a community. The concept of nature is thought based on the ethical, epistemological and ontological principles.

"In the medium and long term, a whole world must be redesigned, which was already designed from the hypothesis of indefinite growth and the irrelevance of the natural substrate … It is necessary to mobilize the potential of the technique, to reveal new possibilities. The necessary redesign of the artificial environment can lead to new qualities" (Manzini, E. 1992). The design process is linked with the transition towards sustainability, when he indicates the world must be redesigned through technique, we can go for the design intervention, through which scenarios may be provided of another qualities. The design of objects is not enough, but to think about expanding design´s intervention to the environmental scale. To achieve this, a commence would be to set a platform of values in the design exercise, that may allow projects where users can adopt another dynamics towards sustainable attitudes. Design for sustainability would materialize through infrastructures, but more deeply would be expressed in interactions of communities, in their lifestyles and cultures.

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