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1992: The rediscovery of Nature

1992: a redescoberta da Natureza

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Abstract

With man on Earth, Nature is being permanently rediscovered through the creation of social nature. The history of humanity is marked by a progressive rupture between human beings and their surroundings, accelerated by mechanization. Through technoscience, artificialized nature reaches the highest stage of this evolution, in which Nature and humanity become reciprocally hostile. With the globalization of the economy, politics, and culture, totalizing relations between society and the environment no longer exist. Technicized nature imposes itself as an abstraction that demands a discourse. Environmental issues are one aspect of this evolution and call for a comprehensive approach capable of enabling a proper interpretation. To achieve this interpretation, the university must move beyond technical and conformist reasoning and confront the task of understanding the world as a whole.

Keywords: nature; technoscience; globalization; environment; university.

Resumo

Com a presença do homem sobre a Terra, a natureza está, sempre, sendo redescoberta, com a criação da natureza social. É a história de uma rutura progressiva entre o homem e o entorno, acelerada pela mecanização. Mediante a tecnociência, a natureza artificializada alcança seu estágio supremo, onde a natureza e o homem tornam-se reciprocramente hostis. Com a globalização da economia, da política e da cultura, não há mais relações totalizantes entre a sociedade e o meio. A natureza tecnicizada se impõe como algo abstrato, exigindo um discurso. A questão do meio ambiente é um aspecto dessa evolução e reclama um estudo abrangente, para permitir uma correta interpretação. Para alcançar essa interpretação, a universidade deve fugir dos raciocínios técnicos e conformistas e enfrentar o entendimento do mundo como um todo.

Palavras-chave: *natureza; tecnociência; globalização; meio ambiente; universidade.*

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FROM FRIENDLY NATURE TO HOSTILE NATURE

In summary, this history can thus be written in terms of its original moment and its present outcome.

Yesterday, human beings selected, from their surroundings, within that portion of Nature available to them, what could be useful for the renewal of life: animal and plant species, stones, trees, forests, rivers, and geological features.

This piece of the world constituted, out of all Nature available to them, their useful subsystem, their vital framework. There was therefore a lack of coordination among dispersed human groups, while close cooperation between each group and its environment was reinforced: it did not matter that darkness, thunder, forests, or floods could cause fear; it was the time of human beings as friends of Nature and of friendly Nature. As Michelet wrote in Tableau de la France (1833): “Nature is atrocious, man is atrocious, but they seem to understand one another.”

The history of humanity on Earth is the history of a progressive rupture between human beings and their surroundings. This process accelerated when, practically at the same time, human beings discovered themselves as individuals and began the mechanization of the Planet, equipping themselves with new instruments in an attempt to dominate it. Artificialized Nature marks a major change in the human history of Nature. Now, with technoscience, we have reached the highest stage of this evolution.

While we await the “eternal day,” with artificial auroras borealis at all latitudes, as predicted by J. Ellul (1954), we already know the human creation of storms, cataclysms, earthquakes, and catastrophes that are fantastically artificial and fantastically incomprehensible (Ettore Sottsass, 1991, p. 40).

Human beings have become a geological, geomorphological, and climatic factor, and the major change lies in the fact that natural cataclysms are an incident, a moment, whereas today anthropogenic action has continuous and cumulative effects, owing to the model of life adopted by humanity. Hence the serious problems in the relationship between contemporary material civilization and Nature. Thus, the problem of human space acquires today a dimension it had never attained before. At all times, the territorial basis of human life has concerned society. But in the present stage of history, such concerns have intensified because the problems have also accumulated.

At the beginning of historical times, each human group constructed its living space with the techniques it invented to extract from its portion of Nature the elements indispensable to its own survival. By organizing production, it organized social life and organized space, according to its own strength, needs, and desires. Each constellation of resources corresponded to a particular model. Little by little, this arrangement was undone: the needs for trade among communities introduced new connections and also new desires and needs, and the organization of society and space had to be carried out according to parameters alien to the group's intimate needs.

This evolution culminates in the present stage, in which the economy has become globalized, and all societies have ended up adopting, to a greater or lesser extent and more or less explicitly, a single technical model that is superimposed on the multiplicity of natural and human resources (Santos, 1991).

Under these conditions, the globalization of the Planet unifies Nature. Its various fractions are placed within the reach of the most diverse forms of capital, which individualize them, hierarchizing them according to logics operating at different scales. A global scale corresponds to a global logic that, at this level, guides investment, the circulation of wealth, and the distribution of commodities. Each place, however, is a meeting point of logics operating at different scales, revealing diverse and sometimes contrasting levels in the pursuit of efficiency and profit and in the use of technology, capital, and labor.

If the technical model has become uniform and its driving force—the surplus value at the global level—is also unique, the results are the most disparate. This is how places are defined and redefined: as meeting points of distant and proximate interests, global and local, expressed through a range of classifications that is constantly expanding and changing.

Without human beings, that is, before history, Nature was one. It remains so in itself, despite the divisions imposed upon it by human use of the Planet. Now, however, there is an enormous change. One, yet socially fragmented for so many centuries, Nature is now unified by history, for the benefit of firms, states, and hegemonic classes. But it is no longer friendly Nature, and human beings are no longer its friends.

ABSTRACT NATURE

Within the current system of Nature, human beings definitively move away from the possibility of totalizing relations with their own portion of territory. What is the point of asking which fraction of Nature belongs to each individual or group if living requires everyone to maintain constant reference to a large number of places? Right where I live, I often do not know where I am. My consciousness depends on a multiform flow of information that exceeds me or does not reach me, so that I lose the possibilities of use or action that are now so numerous and concrete. What appears to be within reach of my hands is concrete, but not for me. What falls to my share are only disconnected parts of the whole, opulent slices or crumbs. How, then, do I identify with my surroundings? Undoubtedly, one may imagine the individual as a being in the world, but can one think of a total human being in a global world?

Undoubtedly, work, understood as a system, is increasingly less local and increasingly universal. As surplus value likewise becomes global—this law of value on a universal scale which, invisibly, prohibits measurement—the parameters of my own value are concealed and are thereby reduced. Here we refer to labor-value applied to globalized production, measured in monetary terms.

We have been surrounded, over the last 40 years, by more objects than in the preceding 40,000. Yet we know very little about what surrounds us. Technicized Nature ultimately becomes an abstract Nature, since techniques, in G. Simondon's (1958) words, insist on imitating it and ultimately succeed.

The objects that serve us are increasingly technical objects, created to meet specific purposes. The actions they contain are imprisoned by purposes that rarely concern us.

We live in a world that demands a discourse, necessary for understanding things and actions. There is a discourse of objects, indispensable to their use, and a discourse of actions, indispensable to their legitimation. Yet both discourses are frequently as artificial as the things they explain and as biased as the actions they bring about.

Without discourse, we understand practically nothing. As innovation is permanent, every day we awaken somewhat more ignorant and defenseless. Queen Juliana of the Netherlands, watching a demonstration of an electronic computer at an

exhibition in Amsterdam, exclaimed: “I cannot understand this. Nor can I understand people who understand it” (W. Buckingham, 1961, p. 27).

Technique is the great banality and the great enigma, and it is as an enigma that it commands our lives, imposes relationships upon us, shapes our surroundings, and administers our relations with them.

If, **yesterday**, human beings communicated with their portion of Nature practically without mediation, today the very definition of what constitutes this surrounding environment—near or distant, local or global—is full of mysteries.

Now that all deeply rooted conditions of life are being destroyed (A. Wellmer, 1974), the tension between objective culture and subjective culture increases exponentially and, likewise, the misunderstandings of our perception, our definition, and our relationship with the environment multiply.

Are we returning to the magical world, where the fanciful, the fantastic, and the phantasmagorical promise to take the place of what is logical and deception may present itself as truth?

Before us today lies the possibility (and the frequency), through the falsification of the event, of the triumph of presentation over meaning, even while demanding an anchor. In the environmental issue, which reveals this facet of contemporary history, this anchor is called the ozone hole, the greenhouse effect, and acid rain; and ideology takes concrete form in the immense territory of the Amazon.

In a world thus constituted, there are no interlocutors in the proper sense, because there is only unilateral communication. There is no dialogue, because words are dictated to us and responses are catalogued in advance. It is a functional mode of speech, and the hypnotic character of communication is the counterpart of “the impoverishment of language through the progressive loss of creativity” (E. Carneiro Leão, 1987, p. 20).

According to Marcuse (1964, p. 95), this language “constantly imposes images and contributes, in a militant manner, against the development and expression of concepts.” Since “the concept is absorbed by the word,” “the word is expected merely to respond to the publicized and standardized reaction. The word becomes a cliché and, as a cliché, governs discourse or text; communication, in this way, prevents the genuine development of meaning” (p. 85).

THE NATURE OF THE MEDIA

The interested, and so often self-interested, mediation of the media not rarely leads to the doctoring of language, necessary to expand its credibility, and to the falsification of discourse, intended to obscure understanding. Environmental discourse is laden with these shades, exaggerating certain aspects to the detriment of others, but above all mutilating the whole.

The “terrorism of language” (H. Lefebvre, 1971, p. 56) leads to media counter-truths, as B. Kayser (1992) teaches us. This author provides examples, inviting us to question the very foundation of certain media discourses. For example: “**Regarding global warming and the greenhouse effect**. One may be certain that, despite the continuous increase in the CO2 content of the atmosphere since the beginning of the industrial era, the climate did not experience warming in the twentieth century. Normal measurements between 1951 and 1980, in relation to those of the 1921–1950 period, show, on the contrary, a non-significant decrease of -0.3°. In any case, the evolution is very slow, and decades are necessary for a climatic change to be recorded. The announced apocalypse—melting glaciers, rising sea levels, etc.—is certainly not for tomorrow. If it is necessary to fight pollution and environmental degradation, we must do so with our eyes open, based on scientific analyses, and not merely by shouting: ‘It is catching fire!’”

If Nature could once create fear, today it is fear that creates a media and false Nature, with one part of Nature being presented as though it were the whole.

What may perhaps be the most dramatic feature of our time is the role that fear and fantasy have come to play in everyday life. There have always been periods of fear. But this is an age of permanent and generalized fear. Fantasy has always populated the human spirit. But now, industrialized, it invades every moment and every corner of existence in the service of the market and power and constitutes, together with fear, an essential element of our model of life.

The universal empire of fear and the universal empire of fantasy are overlapping creations. Freud (1920) already wrote that “the creation of the mental domain of fantasy has a counterpart in the creation of ‘reserves’ and ‘natural parks’ in places where incursions by agriculture, traffic, or industry threaten to transform the land rapidly into something unrecognizable. The ‘reserve’ is intended to preserve the old state of affairs

that has been lamentably sacrificed to necessity everywhere else; there, everything may grow and expand freely, including what is useless and even harmful. The mental domain of fantasy is also a ‘reserve’ thus recovered from invasions by the reality principle” (Leo Marx, 1976, p. 12).

As for fear, Ramsey Clark reminds us that it “already induces us to think more about safety than about justice,” and Furio Colombo (1973, p. 56) uses this testimony to explain the violations of the law, increasingly frequent throughout the world, by legal institutions themselves.

And the media are the great vehicle for this process that threatens human integrity. Although technically possible through the appropriate use of so many sophisticated resources, perception is mutilated when the media deem it necessary to capture attention through sensationalism and fear. Many ecological movements, nourished by the media, destroy, mutilate, or repress Nature.

When the environment, as Nature-as-spectacle, replaces historical Nature, the place where all human beings work, and when cybernetic or synthetic Nature replaces the analytical Nature of the past, the process of concealing the meaning of history reaches its peak. In this way, a painful confusion is also established among technical systems, Nature, society, culture, and morality.

We cry out against certain effects of the savage exploitation of Nature. But we do not speak enough about the relationship between its technically founded domination, the global forces that insist on maintaining the same model of life, and the fact already pointed out by G. Friedmann since the 1950s: that technicization is leading to the anarchic conditioning of modern human beings. The rationalization of existence, so dependent on current relations between technique and society, is one of its pillars.

Yesterday, technique was subordinate. Today, guided by the major actors of the economy and politics, it is technique that subordinates. Where is servile Nature? In fact, it is the human being who becomes enslaved, in a world where those who dominate do not wish to realize that their actions may have objectives but have no meaning. The imperative of **competitiveness**, a frantic career without a destination, is the hallmark of this dissociation between morality and action that characterizes the unfolding of the so-called new world order, in which human and social objectives definitively give way to purely economic concerns, with the commodity playing an all-encompassing role today, including the political commodity. Not only is Nature

presented in tatters, but so is morality, and, in the absence of a common meaning, Marx already said in **The Poverty of Philosophy**, “it is easy to invent mystical causes.”

Criticism alone, however, is not enough to exorcise the dangers that surround us. As early as 1949, Georges Friedmann advised us to consider that this technical milieu “**is the reality** with which we are confronted” and that, for this reason, “it must be studied with all the resources of knowledge, and an attempt must be made to master it and humanize it.”

THE UNIVERSITY AND THE CURRENT ORDER OF THINGS

At this point, the role of the University in this search for knowledge becomes prominent. Yet this task is being threatened precisely by the growing prestige of scientism and the importance it has acquired among those who currently direct higher education.

In a world in which the role of technosciences becomes overwhelming, a dual movement tends to take hold. On the one hand, the disciplines charged with finding technical solutions—the practical solutions demanded of them—receive prestige from businesspeople, politicians, and administrators and thus obtain abundant resources to carry out their work.

A quick visit to the different faculties and institutes is enough to reveal the disparity of resources—facilities, materials, and human resources—according to the more or less commercial and pragmatic nature of the work being carried out. On the other hand, the prestige generated by the perverse process of rationalization of the university is the best passport to positions of command.

Thus, a serious obstacle to the establishment of a consequential process of reflection is the growing contrast within the University between its great moments and an everyday life made miserable by the threat, already underway, of a technical and rationalizing management that leads to the murder of creativity and originality.

In the name of scientism, pragmatic behaviors and technical reasoning that override efforts to achieve a comprehensive understanding of reality are imposed and rewarded. In a university of results, the will to be a genuine intellectual is thereby chastised, while even the best minds are pushed toward spasmodic research that is statistically profitable. This induced tendency has caricatural effects, such as the

bureaucratic production of that ridiculous species of ‘researchers,’ strong because of the funds they manipulate, prestigious because of the relationships they maintain through the use of those funds, and thus occupying center stage, while genuine knowledge practically finds no channels of expression.

As a perverse bureaucratic rationality threatens to invade even those places that cannot live without spontaneity, we run the risk of witnessing the triumph of action without thought over disarmed thought.

Under these conditions, we must recognize that every reaction is difficult and may appear to many as a true suicide, since a university career will no longer need to be an academic career. The great risk is that the refusal of courage and the lack of belief will become routine.

How, then, can we free ourselves from the internalization of violence of which Horkheimer (1974) speaks, or from the “subjection of souls” pointed out by Lenoble (1990, p. 77) when referring to the current way of representing Nature?

Let us remember Heisenberg (1969), who said that “... in science, the object of investigation is not Nature in itself, but Nature subjected to human questioning.” This is not a unilateral, technical, lesser form of questioning, but a comprehensive questioning, eager for understanding, an intellectual task.

Formerly, intellectuals were people who, at the university or outside it, believed in the ideas they formulated and formulated ideas as a response to their convictions. Intellectuals, Sartre said, marry their time and must not betray it. In this way, the French philosopher criticized Balzac’s indifference toward the 1848 days and Flaubert’s incomprehension in the face of the Commune (L. Bassets, 1992, p. 15).

What is to be done when, in the very House founded for the worship of Truth, the organization of everyday life invites us to set aside what is important and fundamental?

In a speech addressed to the North American association of economists, the economist-philosopher Kenneth Boulding (1969), faced with the already glaring deviations of his profession, called for the need for heroism, in order to put an end to conformism, escape technical reasoning, reject spasmodic research, abandon the easy life, and ultimately confront the understanding of the world.

The effort with which we are called upon to address, by whatever means, environmental issues, without a larger space being reserved for a deeper reflection on

the relationships, through technique, between its vectors and actors, on the one hand, and the human community thus mediated and Nature thus dominated, on the other, is characteristic of an era. It both illustrates the risks we run and the need, in every field of knowledge, to act heroically if we wish to continue pursuing truth.

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